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Profitable Dissents: The Mainstream Theatre of Larry Kramer and Tony Kushner as a Negotiating Force Between Emergent and Dominant Ideologies

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Abstract

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By combining cultural theory with empirical data, this dissertation asserts that late-twentieth-century mainstream theatre had the potential to support emergent ideologies in the U.S. context. The [MSOffice1]study finds fault with those who dismiss mainstream theatre based on its commercialism and shows how a production's mainstream status may position its emergent ideology as conventional rather than radical. Much of this work is done through the media's reception of productions, and this dissertation employs the media theory espoused by James Carey to suggest that newspapers do not transmit information as much as they report news [MSOffice2]with rhetorical strategies that confirm the ideologies of their readers. Ideology, here, is defined by the writings of Louis Althusser and Raymond Williams and is understood as an unconscious "frame" through which one sees the world. On the rare occasions that a periodical does transmit new information, readers tend to shift their ideologies accordingly. Using Ric Knowles' materialist semiotics, this study analyzes three productions and their cultural surroundings—particularly newspaper reviews—to illustrate how they contributed to and changed the ideologies of spectators and readers. It reveals that while mainstream theatre may be part of the socializing force of Horkheimer and Adorno's culture industry, one must nevertheless contextualize that socialization and ask whether it supports the dominant or an emergent ideology.

The analysis of this dissertation's first case study, the 2001 New York Theatre Workshop production of Tony Kushner's *Homebody/Kabul*, shows that historical context and media reception are of equal importance to textual content when evaluating a production's ideological work. In the second case study, the 1985 Public Theatre production of Larry Kramer's *The Normal Heart*, the emergent ideology was explicitly argued in the script and incorporated into the mainstream media, helping these ideas become part of the dominant ideology. Finally, the 1993 Broadway production of Tony Kushner's *Angels in America,* presented an emergent ideology, but because the production was framed as mainstream by its Broadway[MSOffice3] location and as high art by its critical reception, its emergent ideology was implicitly marked as conventional. These case studies show how mainstream theatre could support emergent ideologies in the late-twentieth-century U.S. context.

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For Meghann Pytka

it would probably remain unfinished without her

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Chapter One
Introduction

The *Will and Grace* Question

While teaching classes on the politics of performance at Northwestern University, I encountered an interesting problem: my students routinely discussed what we called "The *Will and Grace* Question." *Will and Grace* was a popular television sitcom that ran from 1998 to 2006; Will is a gay lawyer who shares an apartment with a straight, interior designer, Grace. While Will is portrayed sympathetically and the audience is intended to empathize with him, the show often depicts homosexual characters stereotypically—especially Will's flamboyant friend, Jack. My students asked whether this show harmed the gay rights movement through its caricatured portraits of gay men or helped by portraying gay people sympathetically in the mainstream. They enjoyed asking "The *Will and Grace* Question" about the plays we discussed. For example, what were the effects of *Angels in America*? Did its 1993 Broadway premiere help the emerging discourse of gay civil rights? Or did the play's position in the profitable mainstream culture industry erase any of its radical politics? This dissertation posits answers to these difficult questions and demonstrates that mainstream theatre in the U.S. at the end of the twentieth century possessed the ability to support emergent ideologies.

In 1999, noted Professor of Drama Baz Kershaw articulated a crisis in contemporary theatre: modern capitalism bled theatre of its radical potential (*Radical* 5). To overcome theatre's impotence, Kershaw proposed a turn to radical "performance beyond the theatre" to engage the tensions caused by "the conformity forced on cultural production by capitalist consumerism" (*Radical* 16). While Kershaw argued for the primacy of radical performance, Professor of Film and Drama John Bull implicitly critiqued his colleague's over-determinism and recognized mainstream theatre's centrality to the political process. Theatre, Bull argued, is not the site where emergent ideologies materialized. Instead, it is the mediator between the conventional and subversive—the place where the dominant culture has the ability "to take in, to assimilate, and to render more safe, more marketable, the products of any oppositional programme" (134). Despite his intelligent assessment, Kershaw fails to recognize mainstream theatre's political value; that is, they overlook the process by which emergent ideologies are digested and taken up by those capable of shifting the dominant ideology and bringing about political change through institutional processes. My dissertation engages this argument and investigates mainstream theatre's potential to contribute to the acceptance of emergent ideologies in the late-twentieth-century United States context. By analyzing one Broadway production and two off-Broadway productions, I document empirically how late-twentieth-century mainstream theatre supported emergent ideologies and show the ways mainstream theatre may still act as a

mediating force between emergent and dominant ideologies capable of influencing political change.

To avoid the often obscure terminology used in cultural studies, a clear presentation of terms is crucial. The definition of "ideology" used throughout this dissertation is the one Louis Althusser maps out in "Marxism and Humanism" from *For Marx*. Ideology, according to Althusser, is an unconscious system of beliefs that is not a particular *outlook* on the world (which would be conscious), but, instead, an idea of the way the world *is*, a frame through which people view their worlds. (Althusser, *For Marx* 239-40). Suggesting that Althusser's monolithic definition of ideology does not suitably explain how political change occurs, Raymond Williams separates ideology into three subcategories that are always present in society: dominant, residual, and emergent (R. Williams 197). The dominant ideology is the frame through which most people view the world; a residual ideology is an outdated ideology that is still relevant to some portion of society; and an emergent ideology is a view of the world that exists outside the dominant group. Political change, Williams argues, sometimes occurs when the dominant ideology incorporates emergent ideologies into its framework. Using Williams' schema, this dissertation tests the theoretical realm empirically via three case studies to show how this replicable process took place at the end of the twentieth century in the United States. In doing so, this dissertation directly takes to task scholars like Baz Kershaw, David Savran and those in the Frankfurt School who have doubted

mainstream theatre's ability to support any ideology besides the dominant one (Horkheimer *Dialectic*; Kershaw *Radical*: Savran *Queer*).

The next term used throughout this dissertation that needs to be carefully defined is "mainstream theatre." As Lizbeth Goodman points out, mainstream theatre is often defined purely in relation to "alternative" theatre—a form of politically active theatre that emerged out of the social unrest of the 1960s in London and New York (17-18); David Román suggests that mainstream theatre productions are characterized by "opening nights, world premieres, [and] the critical review process that facilitates their official registration into theatre history" (*Acts of Intervention* xx). Here mainstream theatre is defined as any theatrical production with a heterogeneous audience, a high public profile, and that is reviewed in national periodicals such as the *New York Times*, the *Wall Street Journal*, *The New Yorker*.

Because of the commodification of art that took place in the West and which made mainstream theatre one more money-making device in the "culture industry" (Horkhiemer and Adorno 147), scholars, particularly those aligned with the Frankfurt School, doubt mainstream theatre's ability to support anything but the dominant ideology. These scholars who dismiss mainstream theatre based on its commercialism often fall victim to ideological dogmatism and overlook mainstream theatre's political potential (Horkheimer and Adorno; Kershaw *Radical*; Savran *Queer*). This dissertation takes up the conversation concerning politics and theatre begun early in the twentieth century by Irwin Piscator (*The Political Theatre*) and relates it to late twentieth-century

productions in New York City through its use of a new methodology coined by Ric Knowles as "materialist semiotics" (15). This methodology requires one to analyze a particular production by examining all the sign systems surrounding the production, from the script to the theatre's architecture, and from the theatre's neighborhood to the reviews. While the scripts alone might suggest that the case studies in this dissertation supported the dominant ideology, by including material aspects of the productions—particularly reviews—I show how factors outside the scripts helped these productions support emergent ideologies.

This dissertation consists of three case studies, a critical introduction, and conclusion. The introduction summarizes the nearly eighty-year discussion of politics and theatre and introduces the method of materialist semiotics. It also explains the selection of the three case studies—the 1985 Public Theatre production of *The Normal Heart*, the 1992 Broadway production of *Angels in America*, and the 2001 New York Theatre Workshop production of *Homebody/Kabul*—and shows how each of them exemplifies a different way of supporting an emergent ideology, two more effectively than the third. The contrasting case studies taken together create a robust picture of the ways mainstream theatre in New York was able to articulate emergent ideologies and speak to its ability to support political change.

Political Theatre Beyond *Dialectic of Enlightenment*

This section of the introduction summarizes the scholarly conversation concerning the relationship between politics and theatre in the twentieth century in

order to situate this dissertation within its proper theoretical context. It begins by defining Brechtian terminology—particularly "alienation"—and continues by discussing the work of the Frankfurt School and Walter Benjamin in relation to contemporary scholars of politics and performance. This dissertation asserts that in overlooking the later work of both the Frankfurt School and Benjamin, in particular, and by ignoring contemporary political philosophy, in general, current scholarship on politics and performance has oversimplified important analytical concepts. My dissertation, therefore, addresses this critical weakness and provides a more robust interpretation of the political philosophy espoused by the Frankfurt School and Benjamin.

The term "political theatre" comes from Erwin Piscator's 1929 book *Das Politische Theater*. Piscator was a German theatre artist who wanted to create theatre that was utilitarian in its ability to promote Communist Party policy. In *Das Politische Theater*, political theatre is defined as theatre that attempts to persuade spectators to take sides on particular issues. Since Piscator used his political theatre to promote the ideas of the Communist Party in Germany and the U.S.S.R., leftist content continued to be a hallmark of political theatre definitions until late in the twentieth century.

Working from many of Piscator's ideas, German theatre artist Bertolt Brecht brought theoretical depth and formal innovations to the concept of political theatre. His most famous concept, the alienation effect, is concerned with keeping spectators conscious of the conditions of performance, thereby allowing them to engage the

political concepts of the production intellectually. He writes that "acceptance or rejection of [characters'] actions and utterances was meant to take place on a conscious plane, instead of, as hitherto, in the audience's subconscious" (94). While Brecht credits these ideas to Chinese theatre, scholar Min Tian suggests a more direct connection to Russian Formalism. Tian writes that "the concept of the A-effect first used by Brecht in his interpretation of Chinese theatre was actually found in Russian formalist literary theory, and, according to John Willett, it appears to a be a precise translation of Viktor Shklovsky's term "'*priem ostranenniya*'—'the device of making strange'" (203). Regardless of his influences, Brecht, like Piscator, hoped to create a new type of theatre that would be popular with the masses and serve his politics.

A group of German scholars that were similarly interested in the political potential of theatre was the Frankfurt School, Brecht's friends and fellow exiles during World War II. In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, two of those scholars, Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, deliver a scathing critique of mainstream culture, arguing that it can never escape the economic system of which it is a part and thus can never be an effective agent of change. They introduce the concept of "the culture industry," which is the idea that "culture" has become a commodity to be consumed like any other. As such, any aspect of "culture" (painting, music, theatre, movies, etc.) can no longer provide anything besides escapism. All it can do is support of the status quo; it, therefore, cannot deliver "meaning" or "social critique."

> The less the culture industry has to promise, the less it can offer a meaningful explanation of life, and the emptier is the ideology it disseminates. Even the abstract ideals of the harmony and beneficence of society are too concrete in this age of universal publicity. We have even learned how to identify abstract concepts as sales propaganda. Language based entirely on truth simply arouses impatience to get on with the business deal it is probably advancing. The words that are not means appear senseless; the others seem to be fiction, untrue. Value judgments are taken either as advertising or as empty talk. Accordingly, ideology has been made vague and noncommittal, and thus neither clearer nor weaker. (147)

This schema, in which all art is part of the culture industry, suggests that art can neither clarify nor challenge the dominant ideology; by this reasoning, art is merely a distraction from one's life, and any art that attempts to effect political change, such as Brecht's, would not be taken as sincere by the spectators. It would be met with "impatience" to get on to the sales pitch.

Horkheimer and Adorno's view of humanity in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is outdated, however, and because of that the book's concepts must be balanced with the changes that have occurred since 1947 in mainstream culture, political philosophy, and performance theory. In *Dialectic of Enlightenment* Horkheimer and Adorno picture society made up of sleepwalkers overcome by a fog of mainstream culture that makes the dominant ideology seem inevitable; mainstream culture in this vision cannot make the materialities of the world "clearer," and it cannot make the dominant ideology "weaker" through advocating change. All it can do is make money and support "ingenious planning of international concerns" (Horkheimer and Adorno 120). But this polemic, published in 1947, was a product of the Second World War, and as

Horkheimer and Adorno admit in a new preface written in 1969: "This work was written when the end of the Nazi terror was within sight; nevertheless, in not a few places the reality of our times is formulated in a way no longer appropriate to contemporary experience" (ix). If, by 1969, even Horkheimer and Adorno admit parts of the book are out of date, then contemporary scholars should not employ its central thesis without revision. The book's concepts must be balanced with the changes that have occurred since 1947 in mainstream culture, political philosophy, and performance theory.

Adorno's later writings are much less polemical and pessimistic regarding the potential of mainstream theatre to challenge the dominant ideology. In his final work, *Aesthetic Theory*, Adorno delineates a set of guidelines for making popular and politically challenging theatre. Political philosopher Lambert Zuidervaart argues that *Aesthetic Theory* offers an immanent critique[1] of aesthetics in the hopes of becoming "metacritique—a combination, often precarious, of dependence upon, and transcendence of, the object of criticism" (xx). According to Zuidervaart, Adorno hoped that his immanent critique of aesthetics would provide guidelines to create useful political art by showing art's "dependence upon" and potential "transcendence of" the necessary material and cultural conditions under which the work of art was created. Terry Eagleton, in 1997, argues for similar strengths of immanent critique. Eagleton

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[1] Zuidervaart defines "immanent critique" as the moment "when fundamental inconsistencies emerge, [when] the position has proved itself inadequate according to its own criterion." (xviii).

writes that when rhetoric about equality and freedom became part of the dominant ideology in the nineteenth century, the privileged class "could now be challenged by those it suppressed *according to its own logic*, caught out in a performative contradiction between what it said and what it did" (113, italics in original). The rhetoric of the privileged class valued equality and freedom, but the lower classes continued to be oppressed by the actions of the more privileged. When lower classes argued that they were being subjugated and deserved more freedom and equality, the privileged class was forced to listen in a way that would not have been necessary had the dominant ideology not focused on freedom and equality. Similarly, Adorno argues in *Aesthetic Theory* that mainstream art can have the potential to critique its own culture by attempting to catch mainstream culture "in a performative contradiction." For example, if a society claims to value the ideal that every citizen is equal and a play is produced that shows how some citizens are being treated as less than equal, this play is highlighting a performative contradiction in its society. According to Adorno and Eagleton, the group of citizens being discriminated against could then use this play as a rallying point to argue for their rights, and, because the dominant ideology would be caught in a performative contradiction, it would be more likely to relent.

Zuidervaart sums up Adorno's criterion for this type of immanent critique of mainstream culture by art as follows:

> If an artist is devoted to the artistic material, which carries residues of society and history; if, while using this material to make an artwork, the artist consciously objectifies an antagonistic, largely unconscious, and

> inherently sociohistorical experience; if the artist attempts an imaginative solution to the problem that the emerging artwork poses; if the artist senses and surpasses the technical level of contemporary art and society; and if the artist ignores neither the broader antagonisms of society nor their possible resolution, then correct consciousness will be materialized as an artwork's truth content. (116-17)

Though relativist or postmodern scholars may bristle at the words "correct consciousness" and "an artwork's truth content," this passage still has much to offer. It is a much more subtle (and optimistic) analysis of art's potential to challenge society's dominant ideology than the one in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* which was written nearly thirty years earlier. Instead of suggesting that all art is engulfed by the culture industry, it argues that through a very specific set of criteria, art can challenge the dominant ideology. These criteria, while still strongly based in classical Marxism, are also based on antagonisms and contradictions that support an idea of a patchwork ideological system rather than an all-encompassing dominant ideology. If an artwork must "objectify an antagonistic… sociohistorical experience" and not "ignore the broader antagonisms of society nor their possible resolution," it cannot simply represent Adorno's earlier notion of a "culture industry" that was completely dominated by a single ideology. Instead, Adorno's new view is that there are multiple and antagonistic ideologies within society and that art can help show the performative contradictions this tension creates. In this way, art can help point towards potential change. For instance, the dominant ideology about gay men and HIV/AIDS in the 1980s included the contradictory ideas that homosexuals somehow "deserved" the disease and that it was a public health crisis that needed to be addressed; in fact, these contradictory points

of view found expression in several reviews of the 1985 production of *The Normal Heart*. *The Normal Heart* points out this contradiction in society's dominant ideology (as Adorno suggests art should) and uses immanent critique to suggest a reconciliation between dominant ideology and society's behavior.

Walter Benjamin is another scholar whose complex view about politics and performance is often over-simplified in contemporary scholarship. Most often, contemporary theorists cite Benjamin's 1936 essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" to suggest that Benjamin felt that mainstream theatre could not challenge the dominant ideology. This interpretation relies on a simplification of the extremely complicated concept of "aura." To properly understand Benjamin's place in the literature on politics and performance, one must carefully define aura and its surrounding concepts. To do that one must consider Benjamin's wider corpus. Benjamin writes that aura is the art work's "presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be" ("Work of Art" 220). It is not only the canvas, paint, and other materials that make up a painting; it is the history of the painting, the painter, and its authenticity, "the essence of all that is transmissible from its beginning, ranging from its substantive duration to its testimony to the history it has experienced" (Benjamin "Work of Art" 221). But aura does not come from the painting itself: it is, after all, merely canvas and paint. Aura comes from the spectator's mind, from the ideological frame through which the spectator views the art object. Kershaw's book *The Radical in Performance: Between Brecht and Baudrillard* contains a representative example of how

Benjamin's concept of aura is used by contemporary scholars of politics and performance. Kershaw writes that what is important for *The Radical in Performance* is not the concept of aura, per se, "but Benjamin's attempt to grapple with the general meaning of the unique performance" (*Radical* 41). Kershaw continues, "For when consumerism seems designed to commodify every aspect of culture, including the face-to-face encounters of live performance, the issue of the possibility of radical resistance becomes ever more urgent" (*Radical* 41). Kershaw's reading of Benjamin comes down to an analysis of the commodification of live performance, but aura is a concept that extends beyond the process of commodification. This can be seen when noting how media studies scholar Miriam Hansen discusses letters between Benjamin and Adorno. These letters address people's ability to endow natural objects with aura in face-to-face encounters and how this ultimately "eludes theories of commodity fetishism and reification":

> When Adorno proposed a clarification of the notion of aura… suggesting that the trace of the 'forgotten human residue in things (*des vergessenen Menschlichen am Ding*)' was that of reified human labor, Benjamin insisted that this was not necessarily the object [of aura]. 'The tree and the bush that we endow [with an answering gaze] were not created by human hand. Hence there must be a human element in objects which is *not* the result of labor.' That forgotten human element, as Marleen Stoessel argues in her ingenious commentary, is nothing but the material origin—and finality—that human beings share with non-human nature. (Hansen 212)

According to this, Benjamin thought Marxist theories of labor could not explain every aspect of aura. He suggested that one must also remember that human beings share "material origin—and finality" with nature; one must not lose track of humanity's

material origins when practicing historical materialism. The aura with which one can endow a bush or a tree is not necessarily part of a problematic relationship with labor and commodification.

> Because the aura as necessary veil of beautiful appearance (*schöner Schein*) pretends to a premature, merely private reconciliation with a fallen world, it requires the destructive, 'masculine,' demystifying gesture of allegory, the mortifying grasp of knowledge, of critical reading. For only in a fragmentary state, as 'quotation,' can the utopian sediments of experience be preserved, can it be wrested from the empty continuum of history which, for Benjamin, is synonymous with catastrophe. (Hansen 190)

Aura, then, is a "necessary" aspect of "reconciliation" with the world, but one that also requires the self-conscious, "demystifying" act of "quotation" to save "experience" from a dominant ideology ("history").

Much as Benjamin posits that the world must be "demystified" in order for humans to see the dominant ideology in history, so too Brecht argues that theatre must be demystified in order for spectators to see the ideology behind characters' motivations and situations. Aura is a necessary first step to achieving a materialist consciousness of experience; therefore, theatre's latent aura is not evidence that live performance is in service to the dominant ideology. Theatre's aura is instead the first step towards challenging the dominant ideology.

Another aspect of Benjamin's writing that is not yet extensively explored by the existing scholarship on politics and performance is his posthumously published magnum opus, *The Arcades Project*. This work provides a labyrinthine concept of history, historical writing, and hope for ways to create discourses that potentially

disrupt the dominant ideology. Though often obscure, only translated into English in 1999, and written in notes and aphorisms, this work provides some of Benjamin's most relevant thoughts on exactly how his concepts could be used for political analysis. It should be addressed by anyone hoping to use the concepts of the Frankfurt School in an analysis of politics and performance. In it, Benjamin writes:

> It may be considered one of the methodological objectives of this work to demonstrate a historical materialism which has annihilated within itself the idea of progress. Just here, historical materialism has every reason to distinguish itself sharply from bourgeois habits of thought. Its founding concept is not progress but actualization… Overcoming the concept of 'progress' and overcoming the concept of 'period of decline' are two sides of one and the same thing. (*The Arcades Project* 460)

The idea of rejecting notions of "progress" and "decline" is one of Benjamin's sharpest breaks with classical Marxism, and one with which this dissertation is aligned. Political philosopher Susan Buck-Morss describes Benjamin's idea that revolution is not "progress" but "actualization" by writing that:

> The point is, rather, that this utopian desire can and must be trusted as the motivation of political action (even as this action unavoidably mediates the desire)—can, because every experience of happiness or despair that was ours teaches us that the present course of events does not exhaust reality's potential; and must, because revolution is understood as a Messianic break from history's course and not its culmination. (243)

While not writing about art or aura specifically here, it is easy to see how artistic experiences—including those in the theatre—can suggest that our current situation "does not exhaust reality's potential." Indeed, given the relative safety of attending a theatrical performance, it might be an ideal setting in which to see other, potential

realities. However, the question remains: can theatre contribute to "a Messianic break from history"? Buck-Morss suggests that an "act of political revolution cuts across history's secular continuum and blasts humanity out of it" (242-43). While revolutionary moments are, by definition, rare, it seems possible that a piece of theatre could contribute to an individual's or a society's break from its current ideological inclination. Indeed, this dissertation asserts that Brechtian alienation provides the type of demystification that is necessary to invite spectators to change their ideological inclinations.

The Politics of Performance

According to Graham Holderness, in the 1970s the field of politics and performance underwent a major theoretical shift. During that time, the view that political theatre had to have explicit leftist content gave way to the view that

> all culture… contains or expresses or implies a political view: all art, whether consciously or unconsciously, is tendentious, polemical, partisan; all literature and drama speak on behalf of an admitted or unacknowledged belief that one order of things, one set of social arrangements, one structure of political relations, is better or worse than another. (Holderness 5)

This new conception of the way that politics functions in art created a crisis in the very concept of "political theatre," and in recent years scholars have backed away from that term, preferring the more all-encompassing term "the politics of performance." This is due, in part, to the work of neo-Marxists like Louis Althusser. The work of these neo-Marxist thinkers created a "revised Marxist position" which "justified, from the late

1960s onwards, a shift of emphasis away from the direct analysis of society as economic and political organization, and towards the analysis of a society's *ideology*" (Holderness 8). The new emphasis on ideology in Marxist analysis created a turning point in the study of politics and performance, and the field is still experiencing the ramifications of this change. As Holderness summarizes, "the transformation of 'political drama' (as an object of enquiry), into 'the politics of drama' (as a method of analysis) calls for large-scale theoretical revaluation and extensive detailed practical investigation of a much larger field of cultural production" (16). These areas in "a much larger field of cultural production" are likely where emergent ideologies materialize. One such area of practical investigation of drama and its cultural production is the work done by scholars of community theatre.

Community theatre, in this case, does not refer to amateur productions of canonical drama or the little theatre movement. Instead, Eugene van Erven, one of the foremost scholars of community theatre, defines it as

> a worldwide phenomenon that manifests itself in many different guises, yielding a broad range of performance styles. It is united, I think, by its emphasis on local and/or personal stories (rather than pre-written scripts) that are first processed through improvisation and then collectively shaped into theatre under the guidance either of outside professional artists—who may or not be active in other kinds of professional theatre—or of local amateur artists residing among groups of people that, for lack of a better term, could perhaps best be called 'peripheral.' (2)

The methods of community theatre are exemplified by the techniques described in Augusto Boal's *Theatre of the Oppressed*. Boal begins his book by critiquing Aristotelian drama, concluding that

> if there is inequality, no one wants it to be to his [or her] disadvantage. It is necessary to make sure that all remain, if not uniformly satisfied, at least uniformly passive with respect to those criteria of inequality. How to achieve this? Through the many forms of repression: politics, bureaucracy, habits, customs—and Greek tragedy. (25)

Boal sees Aristotelian structure—not only in Ancient Greece, but also in today's theatres—as a source of repression. He contrasts Aristotelian ideals to the theories formulated by Brecht, that "Brecht does *not* want… spectators to continue to leave their brains with their hats upon entering the theatre" (Boal 104). Most importantly for Boal's project, he stresses that "Brecht contends that the popular artist must abandon the downtown stages and go to the neighborhoods, because only there will he [or she] find people who are truly interested in changing society" (105). Boal does just that, recording his flight from "downtown stages" to "neighborhoods" in his chapter "Experiments with the People's Theater in Peru," in which he describes working with communities to discover what problems they want to address in performance, and the ensuing results. Perhaps his most important formal innovation is suggesting that "'spectator' is a bad word" because it implies a passive subject (Boal 154-55). In his experiments, both then and now, audiences suggest what characters should do next, discussing the problems and solutions. Boal's techniques take Brecht's desire for the audience to be intellectually engaged a step further, from silent engagement to vocal and physical participation.

An excellent study of community theatre in the tradition of Boal is van Erven's *The Playful Revolution: Theatre and Liberation in Asia*. While the context is different from Boal's *Theatre of the Oppressed*, van Erven's book begins with a similar theoretical position that can roughly serve as a model for success in the movements that he studied:

> Theatre of liberation is most effectively disseminated through all levels of society when the urban middle class initiators train talented young people who are native to the target grassroots communities and commit themselves to returning home to work as community-based artist-organizers. The results have been obtained when this type of training was structured into a transparent, easily duplicable workshop format and consistently implemented over a long period of time in as many grassroots target communities as possible. (Erven 228)

Van Erven's work is also "the account of a personal journey through Asia; a written documentary of a quest to find political theatre that really works and which possesses a vitality and passion that the contemporary Western theatre seems to have lost" (Erven xi). While I disagree that all Western theatre has lost "vitality and passion," it is inarguable that performances created literally under the barrel of a repressive government's gun—like van Erven's case studies—have a very different urgency to them than mainstream theatre in the West. However, the case studies in this dissertation show that urgency is not "lost" in all Western theatre.

Another example of an area of what Holderness calls "a much larger field of cultural production" from which emergent ideologies might appear is theatre for development (16). Theatre for development is similar to community theatre, but instead

of entering the community to see what issues community members would like addressed, the "experts" enter the community with educational concepts they would like to impart via performance. For instance, "government development projects that were often funded by UNESCO or the World Health Organization for the purpose of bringing information on health or other social issues" are cited as typical by L. Dale Byam's landmark study *Community in Motion: Theatre for Development in Africa* (12). While theatre for development tends to be a top-down approach, the "expert" is ideally meant to engage the community in a dialogue about the imposed topic. Paulo Freire, one of the most important theorists of this type of theatre, writes that

> the role of the progressive educator, which neither can nor ought to be omitted, in offering her or his 'reading of the world,' is to bring out the fact that there are other 'readings of the world,' different from the one being offered as the educator's own, and at times antagonistic to it. (112)

This type of theatre sees its role as educational, but it ideally offers its own solution to the community's problems as just one of many possible resolutions. Then the community and educators can come together to determine which course of action is best. In this way, theatre for development hopes to make it "possible to investigate the community's themes in order to arrive at a better understanding of the conditions that hinder or encourage development" (Byam 86). However, in Byam's book, the idealism of theatre for development is contradicted by the actual results of his case studies. Byam writes, "In summation, Theatre for Development was adopted by many, theoretically, as a Freirian module. In practice, it fell askew of the Freirian frame. But rather

than correct the mistakes, its leaders made excuses about the limitations of Theatre for Development" (197). This shows the difficulty of practicing theatre for development as Freire envisions it; it is, nevertheless, a model worthy of study and further experimentation.

A third area of study within the field of "politics and performance" is the study of postmodern performance. This is another area of cultural production that might be a site for emergent ideologies. Postmodern performance ranges from experimental troupes such as the Wooster Group to auteurs such as Richard Foreman and Robert Wilson to performance artists such as Holly Hughes and Karen Finley to popular street troupes like the San Francisco Mime Troupe and the Bread and Puppet Theatre. The scholars who study these artists posit that by breaking conventional modes of presentation, postmodern performance creates alternative structures of knowing the world.[2] As Herbert Blau puts it, "without such [bourgeois] ideology there would be no mirror of self-recognition, and yet that is precisely the mirror which must be broken if there is to be real self-knowledge, historical knowledge, and not its illusory surrogate" (51). In other words, postmodern artists and scholars hope to reveal alternative ideologies through alternative theatrical conventions.

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[2] While the phrase "alternative structures of knowing the world" may seem vague and equally true of modernism, this is a problem with the definition of postmodernism in general rather than a problem with the definition of postmodern performance. Indeed, Terry Eagleton argues persuasively in The Illusions of Postmodernism that there is little, if any, difference between modernism and postmodernism.

Blau's theories are exemplified by Philip Auslander's examination of the Wooster Group's performance *L.S.D. (… Just the High Points…)* in his book *Presence and Resistance: Postmodernism and Cultural Politics in Contemporary American Performance*. Auslander details the method that the Wooster Group used to create the performance as well as the performance itself. The production consisted of four sections: male members of the cast reading random excerpts from a book by Timothy Leary, a high speed rendition of Arthur Miller's *The Crucible* (with some actors in blackface), a recreation of the actors rehearsing *The Crucible* after taking LSD, and then material taken from debates between Leary and G. Gordon Liddy. Auslander writes that the

> combination of a variety of different kinds of performance deauthorizes the performer's presence, thus eschewing charismatic projection and discouraging the spectator from endowing either representation or representer with authority while encouraging the spectator to focus instead on the process of representation itself and its collusion with authority. (94)

This reading of the Wooster Group's performance text never mentions Brecht directly, but it echoes Brecht's ideas. The Wooster Group in 1985 had technology of which Brecht could only dream, but, in the end, the techniques (using a juxtaposition of media and performance styles) and the goal of discouraging "the spectator from endowing either the representation or representer with authority" are similar to Brecht's. The main difference is that Brecht was a classical Marxist and, thus, wanted to use these techniques to point out the causes of the characters' problems in the "base" of society, whereas Auslander's reading of the Wooster group points out how "representation

itself" is part of "authority," and thus is a "superstructural" element of oppression. But just as some theorists suggest that postmodernism is not so different from modernism (Terry Eagleton, for instance), I want to suggest here that some of what is known as postmodern performance is not crucially different from Brechtian techniques. Indeed, Baz Kershaw writes that it is "important to stay poised between Brecht and [postmodern theorist] Baudrillard" (*Radical* 85), suggesting that while there are differences between the two theorists, there are also similarities, and that the two must be used in concert. The most important similarity is the desire to highlight the formal aspects of the performance in order to suggest the mutability of theatrical conventions as a metaphor for the flexibility of society's norms.

Kershaw's book *The Radical in Performance: Between Brecht and Baudrillard* includes street performances in the category of postmodern performance because, by eschewing traditional theatre buildings, he believes they challenge the dominant ideology contained in those buildings. By this logic, groups like the San Francisco Mime Troupe and the Bread and Puppet Theatre would be studied in the subfield of "postmodern performance" since they are bringing attention to performance norms and confronting them. According to Kershaw, the juxtaposition of performance and public space defies the authority of representation given to artists who work within traditional theatre spaces.

A final example of what Holderness calls "a much larger field of cultural production" where emergent ideologies might surface is identity-based performance.

Scholarship on this area of cultural production analyzes performances that help forge and maintain community, frequently based on sexual orientation, racial or gender identities. Like postmodern performance, these performances attempt to articulate emergent ideologies, but instead of doing so through an exploration of the formal aspects of representation (like the Wooster Group's performances), identity-based performance articulates emergent ideologies based on subject positions that fall outside what the dominant ideology considers "typical." David Román and Tim Miller delineate this type of theatre and argue for the benefits of "preaching to the converted." They suggest that while many journalists and scholars have criticized identity-based performance artists for adopting "a limited scope of address," this dismissive is logically flawed because it "assumes queer artists to be didactic and queer audiences to be static" (Román and Miller 172-73). One can never "conflate all spectators' experiences into a unified response… [because] one person's experience of subversion may be another's experience of boredom, and vice versa" (Román and Miller 175). Likewise, Jill Dolan suggests that critics should "consider gay, lesbian, queer representations as speaking from community or identity positions, rather than speaking for them" ("Introduction" 7). Because identity-based performances are speaking *from* rather than speaking *for* an identity-based position, these extremely personal experiences of the world that often fall outside the dominant ideology are posited as valid. In this way, identity-based performance attempts to create a field of cultural discourse that is contrary to the mainstream.

In fact, community theatre, theatre for development, postmodern performance and identity-based performance all attempt to challenge the dominant ideology by creating representations outside the mainstream culture. I bring up these fields of study, then, because these performance sites may be the places where emergent ideologies are born. However, it is in mainstream theatre that these emergent ideologies can be accepted by the dominant ideology and contribute to a political shift of mainstream culture as opposed to a shift in what Lizbeth Goodman calls "alternative" cultures (17).

Mainstream Theatre and the Politics of Performance

In *The Radical in Performance: Between Brecht and Baudrillard,* Kershaw asks: "what makes a performance radical? How might performances cause people to become radical? Are there common sources for different kinds of radical performance? What are the conditions through which radical performance can thrive?" (*Radical* 5). After explaining that he has never felt "at home" in "theatre buildings" because of his working-class background, Kershaw posits that theatre is not an empty space, but a "space of domination" as theorized by the French philosopher Henri Lefebvre and a physical manifestation of the cultural "distinction" that the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu conceived (*Radical* 31). Kershaw sees "a theatre building" not as "a democratic institution of free speech, but rather a kind of social engine that helps to drive an unfair system of privilege" (*Radical* 31). He argues cogently that through audience training, theatre is "a method of spatial indoctrination that aims to embed normative social

values in the behavior of its participants" (*Radical* 32). He quotes Foucault when he writes: "the disciplines characterize, classify, specialize; they distribute along a scale, around a norm, hierarchise individuals in relation to one another and, if necessary, disqualify and invalidate" (*Radical* 32), and he suggests that the disciplinary function of theatre is mainly to "prevent people from recognizing the full extent of their common ground" (*Radical* 32). While this is one way of interpreting the hierarchies present in a mainstream theatre space, one can also see that an audience could be unified as a body of spectators.

To back up that interpretation, one can invoke a notion of Foucault's about discipline that Kershaw ignores: while writing about Catholic confession, Foucault argues that "the agency of domination does not reside in the one who speaks (for it is he who is constrained), but in the one who listens and says nothing" (84).[3] Similarly, the British cultural theorist Stuart Hall, advocating reader response theory, argues that when analyzing communication, one must allow the listener some power, "however limited and constrained, for use or reading against the grain" (qtd. in Knowles 15). Mainstream theatre is a place of discipline, as Kershaw argues, and that discipline often contributes to the dominant ideology. But theatre's discipline is also capable of challenging the dominant ideology by helping to re-imagine social norms. First, spectators can "read against the grain" and use mainstream theatre as a vehicle to come

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[3] My translation from the French: "l'instance de domination n'est pas du côté de celui qui parle (car c'est lui qui est contraint) mais du côté de celui qui écoute et se tait."

together and view the performance differently than the dominant ideology suggests. Second, while spectators of mainstream theatre may be soothed by plush, red velvet seats into being disciplined, classified, and heirarchized more often than not, there is also the possibility for theatre to use the soothing quality of the environment to allow the spectators Kershaw calls elite to feel safe and comfortable enough to accept an emergent ideology.

In order to analyze the ideological work done by a play, one must take into account all of the semiotic discourse around a theatrical production. One must look at how the production came into being and how the artists interacted with each other and the producer. One must analyze reviews and other media discourse that relate to a production and ask *what* ideology is supported by the production text and the surrounding discourse. Althusser suggests "that ideology 'acts' or 'functions' in such a way that it 'recruits' subjects among the individuals (it recruits them all), or 'transforms' the individuals into subjects (it transforms them all) by that very precise operation which I have called interpellation or hailing, and which can be imagined along the lines of the most commonplace everyday police (or other) hailing: 'Hey, you there!'" ("Ideology" 41-42). A play, or a review of a play, "hails" the spectator or reader as a subject of its discourse, in effect asking the spectator or reader to adopt a particular position or world view. The interpellation surrounding a particular production cannot be seen by analyzing the production's script alone. One must also examine the sign systems surrounding the production. Materialist semiotics is a method which allows

this type of analysis and is the perfect answer to Graham Holderness' call for a "large-scale theoretical revaluation" and a method to investigate "a much larger field of cultural production" when examining the politics of performance (Holderness 16).

Materialist Semiotics

In the 1980s, semiotics was questioned by materialists because of its suggestion that there could be a closed sign system (Knowles 15). In 1989 and 1990, however, Marvin Carlson—influenced by the Prague School—amended theatre semiotics by opening the signifying system beyond the production text to include signs perceived in the auditorium, the theatre's lobby, the neighborhood, the trip to and from the theatre (Carlson *Theatre Semiotics*; Carlson *Places of Performance: The Semiotics of Theatre Architecture*). Twelve years later, Knowles combined Carlson's theories with the reader response theories of Stuart Hall to suggest the audience has even more power to interpret signs than scholarship previously acknowledged.

Materialist semiotics, as Knowles describes it, concentrates on three fundamental areas: the performance text, the conditions of production, and the conditions of reception. In order to examine the performance text, one does a close reading of the script, the mise-en-scène, and the design. One can base this reading of the performance text on accounts from written sources and/or interviews, photos, videos (if available), and other records of what occurred onstage. Knowles suggests that, if possible, one should actually attend the production multiple times to accurately use his method, not because that will provide the scholar with an objective or definitive measure of the

performance text, but because it will give the scholar more detailed data to combine with other accounts of the production. In order to examine the conditions of production, one summarizes the historical moment by analyzing histories, accounts from written sources or/and interviews, and newspapers. One must also examine how the play came to be produced at that moment, again based on accounts from written sources or/and interviews and any other available production records. Finally, there are two aspects to examining the conditions of reception. The first is to get a sense of what it was like for an audience member to travel to the theatre, to watch the show, and then to leave the theatre, and that is the sense in which Knowles uses it most prominently in his book *Reading the Material Theatre*. One does that by analyzing the architecture of the theatre (interior and exterior), the theatre's amenities, neighborhood, transportation available to and from the site, ticket prices and audience demographics. All this can be based on accounts from written sources or/and interviews, physical visits to the theatre, photos, and histories of the neighborhood. The second aspect of investigating the conditions of reception is to analyze the discourse surrounding the play such as reviews, interviews, advertising campaigns, and any other cultural artifact that related to the play. Susan Bennett argues that reviews and other factors surrounding the play influence a spectator's "selection" of a particular play, and that each act of buying a ticket, to some extent, is buying a particular ideology (118). Reviews and advertising, like all discourse, have an ideological content. Basing one's ticket purchase on reviews and advertising, then, is to be swayed or made curious by a particular ideology. Therefore, studying the

selection process will help show what ideology the spectators were buying, and how the socialization that occurred in that transaction could have challenged or maintained the dominant ideology.

While I will be doing close readings of the performance text and materialist semiotic analyses of the conditions of production in order to get a sense of what a given production was like, it is the conditions of reception that will receive the most attention in my dissertation. This is because the conditions of reception—particularly a production's reception in the mainstream press—give the most insight into how these productions did political work. First, more people read reviews of a play in the national mainstream press than see the play itself. Second, these reviews show the frames through which spectators were expecting to see the play; after all, if a review states that the play is the best tragedy since *Macbeth*, even if a spectator is skeptical, it may be difficult to not have the comparison in mind while watching the production.

Finally, and most importantly, I argue that a review is trying to incorporate a theatrical production's ideology relative to the worldview of its periodical. The review functions to interpolate the periodical's readers and confirm the periodical's ideology. I make this argument by utilizing the theories of James Carey. In his work on media theory, Carey distinguishes between "transmission" and "ritual" views of communication (17). Basically, the transmission view posits communication as a simple exchange of information: I know information, and I convey it to you. The ritual view of communication is based instead on the creation and maintenance of ideologies. Carey

argues that popular media is more inclined towards "ritual" communication. For instance, a subscription to *The Nation* will not only transmit information but will also confirm a liberal ideology; likewise, a subscription to *The Wall Street Journal* will transmit information while confirming a more conservative ideology. However, there are moments when the dominant ideology shifts, and utilizing Carey's ritual view of communication allows one to see how reviews of the case studies not only transmitted information but also helped to confirm or challenge the dominant ideology. Thus, this dissertation argues that the ritual communication taking place in theatre reviews is one of the overlooked elements in the current theories of politics and performance.

Case Studies

The 2001 New York Theatre Workshop premiere of *Homebody/Kabul*, the 1985 Public Theatre premiere of *The Normal Heart*, and the 1993 Broadway premiere of *Angels in America* were chosen as case studies because each is a mainstream production particularly suited to the materialist semiotic reading described above and to what David Schlossman inexactly calls "fairly clear links to political issues" (137). Each of my case studies is also remarkable because of the amount of commentary on them in the contemporaneous U.S. national news media, partly because of the relationship between their content and political issues of the day.

The first case study examines responses to the 2001 New York Theatre Workshop premiere of *Homebody/Kabul*, produced just a few months after the 11 September World Trade Center attacks. This play did not transmit information that was not already in the

news, yet this dissertation shows how the *medium* of theatre and the resulting media response to the play created a different message from that of the Bush administration's response to the attacks, and how the play's reviews did political work. Because of the rhetorical extremes expressed by the reviews (for example, the *Wall Street Journal* called the play the work of a "Taliban playwright" [B.D. Phillips 2001]), this case study is ideal for exploring the notion of a ritual view of communication. The extremes make the ideological positions of the reviews explicit in a way that is extremely unusual and which sheds considerable light on the interpellation of their readers. This case study also explores the concept of alienation. Because of accidental resonances to life outside the theatre, the spectators were frequently made aware of the fact that they were watching theatre. Because the play's plot resonated with contemporaneous events, the alienation created another set of spectator expectations that also contributed to a particular interpellation. The following chapters all work from the definitions and concepts laid out in this first analysis.

The second case study applies materialist semiotics to the 1985 Public Theatre premiere of *The Normal Heart*. It demonstrates how the play was able to bring information about HIV/AIDS to the U.S. and to raise money and volunteers for various philanthropic organizations dedicated to fighting the spread of AIDS. In this chapter, the advertising for and reviews of the production are analyzed, and I argue that they frame the production as a serious discussion about the AIDS crisis more than as a piece of art. For instance, there are few claims that the play is well written, riveting, or even a

good piece of theatre. The advertisements and reviews frame the play as educational by using the bulk of their space to talk about the health crisis, not the play's artistic merits. This hailed spectators not as audience members of art but as citizens being educated to fight against this disease. The script and direction were based in the tradition of realism and told the story of the death from AIDS of a gay activist's lover. The set was also mainly in the tradition of realism except for an alley-seating configuration and writing on white-washed walls; the alley-seating created two sections of spectators across from each other, making audience members aware of their position watching theatre, and the writing on the walls indicted public institutions that were not responding to the AIDS crisis, and gave an updated number of victims. This writing fostered an alienating effect similar to that in *Homebody/Kabul* where the world outside the theatre was brought into the consciousness of the spectators, but it was done intentionally. In the lobby outside of *The Normal Heart*'s performance space were various pamphlets and informative posters telling spectators how they could get involved in the fight against AIDS; these suggestions ranged from places to donate money to opportunities to volunteer. These suggestions hailed spectators as civil participants not only by watching the play but also by becoming activists.

Finally, the third case study concentrates on the 1993 Broadway production of *Angels in America*. While this play ostensibly addressed topics similar to *The Normal Heart* (gay men, AIDS, U.S. politics in the 1980s), it was received quite differently. Reviewers almost invariably called it art, and it was instantly hailed as a classic, unlike

The Normal Heart which was received as activism. Some of this commentary was because of its placement on Broadway—the most mainstream of all U.S. theatrical settings. Because it was received as "art" rather than "activism" in its reviews, *Angels in America* was positioned to change discourse about gay men, AIDS, and the 1980s in a way that the off-Broadway production of *The Normal Heart* could not possibly have done eight years earlier. Many reviews call the play "universal" in its themes, and these reviews interpellated readers into a worldview that allowed the play's characters—mainly gay men of varying backgrounds—to be part of the U.S. mainstream. While *Angels in America* likely did not turn a great percentage of its spectators into activists, and its money from tickets and merchandise went towards profits rather than towards charitable donations, it nonetheless did exactly what John Bull suggests mainstream theatre can do: it took an emergent ideology and was able to make more accessible and digestible an oppositional program (329). *Angels in America* was the most successful of all these case studies in changing the dominant ideology, and it was successful precisely because it was a mainstream, for-profit production. Its political work was not in spite of its position in the "culture industry," but because of it.

Taken together, these case studies show how three pieces of mainstream theatre were able to support an emergent ideology. In 2001, *Homebody/Kabul* was received in the media as a liberal play that went against the Bush administration's nascent "war on terror" rhetoric that was quickly becoming the dominant ideology. This case study shows how theatre that is perceived as topical (though it was written before the events

to which the media related it) can make an impressive foray into national discourse (77 media articles), but still not significantly alter the dominant discourse. This is important to note because it shows that (a) theatre could still constitute a "media event" in 2001 and (b) articulating an emergent ideology off-Broadway is not necessarily enough to alter the discourse of the dominant ideology. *The Normal Heart* received a great deal of media attention in 1985 because of its intentional topicality and its fiery political attacks; it was framed by the theatre's advertising and the subsequent reviews not as great art but as activist drama. This horizon of expectations encouraged spectators to feel that they were engaging in politics by watching the play. The information in the lobby about where to donate money and time to combat the spread of HIV/AIDS enabled them to act on that sensation. The New York premiere of *Angels in America* garnered much media attention because of its location on Broadway, the play's previous West Coast and London successes, and its receipt of the Pulitzer Prize. It did not interpellate the spectators as activists like *The Normal Heart*, but its position on Broadway, the reviews that hailed it as an instant classic, and its brief but award-winning history suggested to spectators that gay men, HIV/AIDS, and a liberal critique of the Reagan administration were now part of the dominant ideology. This dissertation argues that this sense of acceptability could not have occurred because of an off-Broadway production, let alone because of the type of radical performance that Kershaw supports. *Angels in America* was accepted by the mainstream theatre and, because of that, its ideological content was seen to be part of the dominant ideology. Each of my case studies articulated an

emergent ideology very differently, and the press had extremely varied reactions to them. These contrasting case studies contribute to broad picture of the way mainstream theatre in New York at the end of the twentieth century can support emergent ideologies, and these analyses function together to suggest that without this type of support, emergent ideologies might never find their way into the dominant ideology articulated by the culture industry.

Chapter Two
Repairing Reality:
Materialist Semiotics, the Media and *Homebody/Kabul* After the 2001 World Trade Center Attacks in New York

"Did you really write this before September 11th?"

When Tony Kushner visited Northwestern University on April 8, 2002, he gave a lecture followed by a question and answer period. Since the U.S. was still engaged in military action in Afghanistan and Kushner's play *Homebody/Kabul* was slated to be produced in London, New England, Los Angeles, and Berkeley after a successful run in New York, it probably surprised no one that most of the questions related to his new play's success and its seemingly prescient relation to contemporaneous events. Nearly every review or article about the play stressed that it had been written before the attacks on the World Trade Center in 2001, and Kushner himself stressed that in this lecture. Nevertheless, people's questions made it clear that they saw the play as a response to current events, and one professor of theatre from Northwestern even asked, "Come on, did you really write this before September 11th?" Which, of course, he did. But why did people interpret this play in relation to events it could hardly have predicted?

This chapter begins with a summary of the conditions of production of the play; continues with an analysis of how the conditions of reception in general and the media response in specific interpellated an audience; and finishes with a close reading of the performance text. Special care is given to examining the frames surrounding the play,

particularly its media reception, because this shows that people understood this play in relation to the World Trade Center attacks and the subsequent U.S. attack of Afghanistan. The production was framed as the only piece of mainstream art in the fall of 2001 to oppose the prevailing narrative of the U.S. as blameless victim striking back with unequivocal righteousness. Since *Homebody/Kabul* was framed as the singular piece of mainstream art opposing the dominant ideology of the Bush administration's rhetoric of a "war on terror," it was nearly impossible *not* to see the play as a reaction to the World Trade Center attacks of 2001, as the Northwestern professor's question makes clear. The media response to the play also demonstrates how a mainstream theatre production can not only be viewed as supporting an emergent ideology but also how that support may not be enough to significantly alter the dominant ideology. Using the ritual view of communication posited by James Carey to examine *Homebody/Kabul*'s reviews, this chapter argues that though the production's media response supposed the play to support an emergent ideology, it did not bring this emergent ideology into the fold of the dominant ideology. This is in stark contrast to the next two chapters where it will be shown that another off-Broadway production was able to position its spectators as activists and a Broadway show was able to include a new group of people (gay men) as citizens in the imaginary community of the United States. *Homebody/Kabul,* however, was never meant as a response to the events of 2001; it was merely read as one, and that is one of the most important reasons that it could not

and did not do the same kind of ideological work as *The Normal Heart* and *Angels in America*.

Kushner began to write the script for *Homebody/Kabul* 1997—long before the World Trade Center attacks—as a one-act monologue, simply titled *Homebody,* for British actress Kika Markham. It told the story of a depressed British "homebody" who was fascinated with Afghanistan as represented in an outdated guidebook. This monologue would eventually become the first act of a three-act play, after it had workshop readings at the Chelsea Theatre in December 1997 and at the Alley Theatre in Houston on June 26, 1998. It was re-staged as a one-act at the Chelsea from July 12-31, 1999. Given Kushner's history of rewriting on projects like *Angels in America*, it is not surprising that he continued to work on this play for four years after its initial creation as a monologue in 1997. As early as 1999 Jim Nicola at the New York Theatre Workshop was interested in staging the play as a one-act, but Kushner told him that he felt that there was more to be written (Nicola). In fact, there were two more acts to be written, totaling approximately three more hours of stage time.

By agreeing to produce a four-hour play about Afghanistan, a country largely ignored by the American public before the World Trade Center's destruction, Nicola obviously took a risk. He had Kushner's name as a selling point. When the New York Theatre Workshop took out a full-page ad in the *New York Times*, the ad centered on Kushner's name, but could Kushner's name sell a four-hour play that was so different

in topic from his highly acclaimed *Angels in America*, especially before Afghanistan began appearing on the nightly news? Nicola explained his decision to produce it by saying:

> If [Kushner] were writing about, you know, the price of oranges in Florida, I'm sure that it would be worth reading. And it would be fascinating, and I would learn something and experience something. … I think it's a very powerful play … that the time has put in a certain box that it's bigger than, and that over time, as it's received, it's going to be recognized as a play… [that's] big and full of images that inspire your imagination. You're inspired to be a better person and citizen of the world by an artist like this in a way that say journalism or something that's more aimed at documenting a particular circumstance or particular individual's experience doesn't do. (Nicola)

Ultimately, the play became the most topical production in New York, and that was its main selling point. However, Nicola did not expect that at the point he chose to produce the play, when Declan Donnellan signed on to direct it, or during rehearsals.

Donnellan directed Kushner's *Angels in America* in London in January of 1992, and this experience helped persuade the founder of the famous Cheek by Jowl company to direct *Homebody/Kabul* in New York. The New York Theatre Workshop's particularly process-oriented rehearsal process ultimately allowed Donnellan to "de-resonate" certain lines, such as a specific reference to Osama bin Laden and "one distraught character [who] makes a wild prediction that the Taliban will come to New York" (Donnellan qtd. in Raymond 45). The New York cast used actors who, if not Afghan, were at least of Middle-Eastern descent to play the Afghan characters (Buggeln), and all

the actors were Equity members and quite experienced, which ensured an atmosphere of professionalism and artistry around the production; after the 11 September attacks, even more responsibility was felt by the actors to give the text its due (Nicola). Because the New York Theatre Workshop's mission includes the development of new works (New York Theatre Workshop "*Homebody/Kabul* Program" 9), Kushner was involved in the rehearsal process alongside Donnellan, the set designer Nick Ormerod,[4] Nicola, the dramaturg Mandy Mishell-Hackett, and the cast, rewriting the play up until its first preview performance on December 5, 2001. They created an informal atmosphere that allowed the actors to express their feelings about their parts more openly than is often possible in an equity production process, and also allowed the director and designer the flexibility to consult with the playwright at every stage in the process. While this may seem normal for rehearsals of a new play, the New York Theatre Workshop provides a particularly collaborative environment for playwrights, allowing them to be present at every stage of the development and rehearsal processes. Before the 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center, this enabled the text to develop with a certain amount of ensemble work. More importantly, after the attacks, it permitted the production team and cast the ability to slightly alter the production for a U.S. audience that now had a conception of Afghanistan and the Taliban based on the media coverage of the World Trade Center

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[4] Ormerod and Donnellan are both founding members of Cheek by Jowl and have worked together since 1981.

attacks and the U.S. military activity. However, while the production was changed slightly, Kushner insisted that no lines were altered to reflect contemporaneous events (Kushner "Personal Interview"). *Homebody/Kabul* opened on December 19, 2001, and I was able to see the play in early January.

January 4, 2002

As I emerged from the subway onto Fourth Street on my way to see *Homebody/Kabul* at the New York Theatre Workshop on January 4, 2002, the evening was cold but clear. The crime-filled mass transit system I heard about growing up on the west coast in the 1980s was not the subway I took in 2002. This was a post-Giuliani, post-9/11 subway: clean, friendly, and with a car that had a recorded voice telling me the next stop instead of a static-filled and unintelligible announcement from the driver. Walking east on Fourth Street, I passed Washington Square, NYU, and the innumerable coffee shops, record stores, boutiques and restaurants of the upscale East Village. The neighborhood increased my feeling of being a sophisticated and literate person going to see what was being billed as the first major work by playwright Tony Kushner since his 1993 epic *Angels in America* (New York Theatre Workshop "Press Release").

I knew the run of *Homebody/Kabul* had already been extended prior to opening night and again after the press reviews. Every evening was either selling out or coming close to it. There were only six articles published about the planned New York production before the World Trade Center attacks of 2001, and their main concern was

how *Homebody/Kabul* would compare to *Angels in America* (H. Hall; Hartigan; Bornstein; McKinley; Hurwitt; Beck), but after the World Trade Center attacks the media coverage of *Homebody/Kabul* was extensive. Over seventy articles would eventually be written about the 2001 New York Theatre Workshop production.[5] These reviews ranged from "celebrating" the play by calling it the most "important drama in the last decade" ("Kushner's Great" Heilpern) to criticizing the play as propaganda written by a "Taliban playwright" (B. D. Phillips). Depending on what paper(s) they read, audience members could enter the New York Theatre Workshop expecting to see dangerous terrorist propaganda, the latest work to restore political and artistic relevance to U.S. theatre, or any number of positions in between. Theatre scholar Susan Bennett writes that

> multiple horizons of expectations are bound to exist within any culture and these are, always, open to renegotiation before, during, and after the theatrical performance. The relationship then between culture and the idea of the theatrical event is one that is necessarily flexible and inevitably rewritten on a daily basis. (106)

Because of the sheer number of articles and points of view about the play and concurrent events relating to the Taliban and Afghanistan, *Homebody/Kabul* had even more potential "horizons of expectations" than normal. Due to the number of frames through which audience members could be viewing the play, this production became a

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[5] By January 4, there were already fifty-six articles on the production published. According to New York Theatre Workshop manging director Lynn Moffat, a typical production receives between approximately twenty to twenty-five reviews. By the time *Homebody/Kabul* closed, it received three times that number (Moffat).

likely spot for cultural "renegotiation." Richard Knowles considers theatrical performances "cultural productions which serve specific cultural and theatrical communities at particular historical moments as sites for the negotiation, transmission, and transformation of cultural values" (10). Since the New York Theatre Workshop production of *Homebody/Kabul* came so soon after the World Trade Center attacks of 2001 and during the early days of the U.S. occupation of Afghanistan, the play was a perfect site for cultural negotiation, for the "transmission, and transformation of cultural values." But this did not merely occur during the performance.

Marvin Carlson argues that "both theatre organizations and public have come to accept reviewers as 'official' readers of productions, giving to their reactions a particular authority" (*Theatre Semiotics* 23). By analyzing the reviews of *Homebody/Kabul*, one can view what Carlson calls the "official" discourse surrounding the play, which in this case relates to the "official discourse" surrounding the World Trade Center attacks and the emerging discourse from Washington about the "war on terror." The seventy-seven articles about *Homebody/Kabul* are material evidence of public discourse writing and rewriting the meaning of both the play and recent events.

When the World Trade Center was attacked in September of 2001 and the U.S. responded by invading Afghanistan, the U.S. media was suddenly replete with stories about burqas, hijab, and other cultural aspects of Afghanistan, particularly its treatment of women. During rehearsals, the artists involved with the production expected the

spectators to be ignorant of Afghan culture; suddenly, the expectation was that a spectator would have a certain familiarity with Afghan culture (Nicola). This could not help but affect the actors' performances as well as the frame through which a spectator saw the play. As Nicola put it, "It's almost impossible to not encounter [the play] through the lens of our common experience of the last three months and see that as the major element of it" (Nicola). Theatre scholar James Fisher writes that "Kushner has seen his newest play, *Homebody/Kabul*, which he began writing nearly four years ago, become, as his two-play epic *Angels in America* did a decade ago, a lightning rod for social and political debate on questions of immediate import" (*Theatre* ix). An important difference, though, is that in 1993, when Kushner wrote *Angels in America*, he looked back at events that had already happened and commented on them. In *Homebody/Kabul*, a coincidence of world events made his play *appear* to comment on the present. This discrepancy is an important factor that made *Homebody/Kabul*'s apparent support for an emergent ideology ineffectual.

The publicity and reviews for the production invariably noted that the play had been in the works for several years and that no one involved was deliberately capitalizing on the recent tragic events. Nevertheless, recent events rendered it impossible to walk towards a theatre to see a play partially set in Kabul without thought about contemporaneous affairs. In mid-September, while George W. Bush literally used "dead or alive" rhetoric in his "crusade" against Osama bin Laden(Bush

"9/17/2001"; Bush "9/16/2001"), 4,000 Afghans fled into Pakistan daily, fearing the approaching U.S. invasion (Hayes). The Taliban offered to turn in bin Laden if given some evidence of his guilt, but the Bush administration was not interested in negotiating (Hayes). Alongside these geopolitical rumblings in mid-September, contemporaneous events changed art in the U.S. "The League of American Theaters and Producers quickly hammered out an agreement whereby performers in suddenly imperiled [New York] shows would accept pay cuts for a month to minimize financial damage that came from drastically reduced attendance" (Pressley). There was also a "new look for entertainment in a terror-conscious world" (Leland and Marks). Movies, television shows, plays, books, mainstream music, video games and the internet all voluntarily toned down anything that might be seen as inappropriate. Stephen Sondheim's musical *Assassins* was pulled from the 2001-02 Broadway season; Arnold Schwarzenegger and Tim Allen both had movies pulled because their plots involved terrorists (one an action movie, the other a comedy); Jon Stewart began his normally irreverent show after a week off the air by saying, "I'm sorry to do this to you; it's another entertainment show beginning with an overwrought speech of a shaken host" (Leland and Marks). Even the satirical internet magazine *Modern Humorist* which regularly published scathing satires of Bush wrote, "You probably wouldn't guess that the creeps behind *Modern Humorist* are the sort who wave flags and sing 'America the Beautiful' with strangers on the street… But that is what we have been doing, in unity

with others" (Leland and Marks). All of this shows that the World Trade Center attacks and their aftermath effected entertainment across media and political spectra.

In contrast, the New York Theatre Workshop production of *Homebody/Kabul* was produced as planned. Reporting on the production, *Newsweek* wrote, "Surely Kushner wouldn't dare go ahead with 'Homebody/Kabul,' a play set in Afghanistan that features a Taliban mullah, women in burqas and at least one reference to Osama bin Laden. Or would he?" (Peyser). Going ahead with the production was not entirely the playwright's decision. Though artistic director Jim Nicola and Kushner had "some discussion about it," in the end they "didn't consider the possibility of postponing for very long" (M. Phillips "After the Attack"). At this moment in history, any reference to Afghanistan and the Taliban was potentially offensive, let alone a play that represented Taliban as three-dimensional characters rather than villains. When asked why the New York Theatre Workshop did not consider postponing the production, Nicola said that he and Kushner did not find anything in the play offensive (Nicola).

Even though *Homebody/Kabul* is decidedly *not* "about" the events of 2001, the reaction to it in the media made it appear as if it was by combining Kushner's comments on world events and the play. In particular, an interview published first in the *Los Angeles Times* in September and then in the *Chicago Tribune* in October (M. Phillips "After the Attack"; M. Phillips "Art Imitates"), and an interview from *Newsweek* in December (Peyser), report Kushner's criticism of the Bush Administration and its

handling of the 11 September attacks as if they are part of the play. These interviews mix journalistic prose about the play with quotations from Kushner, and in the process collapse Kushner's comments on contemporaneous events and his play into one topic. This created a (perhaps misleading) ideological frame through which the play was seen in every review after the interviews: *Homebody/Kabul* was supposedly a "leftist" comment (which the reviews seem to simplistically define as disagreeing with the Bush administration's actions) on the events of fall 2001.

In the interview published in September and October 2001, Kushner described being in Ireland when the World Trade Center was attacked, and how the British and Irish press were sympathetic to the suffering in the United States. But he went on to explain how the press he was reading

> was also full of a kind of European horror at the American cowboy mentality so stunningly embodied by our president. It created an impression that frightened me—the impression that America could only respond to this by talking like this was the shoot out at the OK Corral. A depressing number of people think this is truly a war, which it is not, in any sense. (M. Phillips "Art Imitates")

This criticism of both President Bush and a more general "American cowboy mentality" went against the Bush administration's "crusade" rhetoric (Bush "9/16/2001"). By actively questioning whether the attacks on the World Trade Center truly constituted "a war," Kushner also blatantly interrogated the Bush administration's "war on terror" rhetoric first used on September 16th and then deployed consistently (Bush

"9/16/2001"). This critique of the Bush administration's "war on terror" rhetoric never appeared in the play *Homebody/Kabul* because the script pre-dated the term, but the interview was ostensibly about the play and so Kushner's take on the events of fall 2001, which the media deemed "leftist," was inextricably associated with the play he wrote before those events took place.

Further evidence of the way the media collapsed Kushner's criticism of the "war on terror" and *Homebody/Kabul* can be seen in a *Newsweek* interview that quoted Kushner's statement that he knew "a lot more about the situation than a lot of the people [he heard] on talk shows, which is not always reassuring because some of them are generals" (Peyser). Regardless of the veracity of that claim, Kushner's thoughts about the generals handling the "war on terrorism" do not appear in *Homebody/Kabul*, but were again part of an interview that purported to be about the play. Thus the comment critiquing the generals running the "war on terror" became associated with the production in a way that framed the play as a "leftist" critique of the Bush administration's response the 2001 World Trade Center attacks.

In October 2001, the U.S. began a ground assault against the Taliban in Afghanistan, and in November the U.S. began to take cities previously held by the Taliban (Hayes). On December 1, the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) delayed a $60,000 grant for a production of *Homebody/Kabul* scheduled to take place later that season at Berkeley Repertory Theatre (Pogrebin "Arts Agency"). *Newsweek* commented

that "some people"—meaning, in this case, the U.S. government—"still don't love the idea [of *Homebody/Kabul*]" (Peyser). Nevertheless, on December 5, 2001, *Homebody/Kabul* had its first preview performance at the New York Theatre Workshop, and on that same day Hamid Karzai was chosen to head the interim government of Afghanistan. On December 16, the United States declared that al-Queda was destroyed in Afghanistan, and three days later *Homebody/Kabul* had its official New York opening while the NEA approved funding for the Berkeley production (Pogrebin "Split Decision"; Trescott).

All these events pertain to what Bennett calls "selection." The selection process begins with the theatre's decision to produce a play and ends when a spectator chooses to see the play on a particular evening. Bennett writes that "where groups are reliant on government grants, self-imposed censorship may well result" (108). It is interesting that even though the New York Theatre Workshop is a non-profit theatre dependent upon many grants, it nevertheless chose to go ahead with the production of *Homebody/Kabul*. This decision was partly based on Kushner's attitude that there was nothing controversial in the play, and partly based on artistic director Jim Nicola's willingness to take a risk that no other New York theatre was willing to take: to produce a play that could potentially offend in fall of 2001. This gamble ultimately paid off with sellout crowds, two extensions and eventually three separate U.S. productions and one U.K. production in the 2001-02 season alone (Snyder).

It is undeniable, however, that world events and the controversy surrounding the production effected a spectator's decision to buy tickets. Bennett points out that "the audience member is always buying another's ideology" (118), and that reviews often "determine a very specific set of expectations in the audience and thus determine how that audience will receive the play" (122). After all, as Carlson reminds us, "even a reader who does not believe that a new play is likely to truly be 'the wittiest comedy since Noel Coward' will be unlikely, having read such a comment, to see the play without Coward becoming a more or less conscious intertextual element in the reception" (*Theatre Semiotics* 23-24). The ideologically charged articles surrounding Kushner's play—like the *Newsweek* interview that suggested that the play is critical of the "war on terror" rhetoric even though it predates it—probably could not help but become part of a spectator's reception of the play. These types of articles, along with the NEA controversy, created a relatively specific (if perhaps mistaken) horizon of expectations for audience members: this play is a "leftist" critique of United States foreign policy that is related to current events.

However, an audience's horizon of expectations is not based solely on the media reception of a play; it is also based on material elements of the play-going experience like the neighborhood, the theatre's architecture, the pre-show scenery and amenities, and the program. Carlson writes that beyond "providing a space for a public to watch a performance, [the theatre] will provide many additional connotative meanings to the

culture of which it is a part" (*Theatre Semiotics* 43). Bennett, in a similar vein, argues that "the milieu which surrounds a theatre is always ideologically encoded and the presence of a theatre can be measured as typical or incongruous within it" (126). In this case, seeing *Homebody/Kabul* at the New York Theatre Workshop was entirely typical of the "milieu" surrounding it. Surely there was no better place to see a play framed as oppositional to conservative U.S. policy than the East Village, famed for housing generations of rebellious artists and intellectuals among its coffee shops and lofts.

Walking along a wide sidewalk littered with the East Village's typical garbage cans and parked bicycles, and passing the art galleries and coffee shops that surrounded the theatre space, the audience reached two sets of plain glass doors. The unimposing façade of the New York Theatre Workshop fit right into the surrounding shops. Indeed, one might have walked by without noticing the theatre. Instead of the glamour and glitter of Broadway, the minimalist façade of the New York Theatre Workshop meshed well with the artsy and intellectual aesthetic of the East Village milieu. Thus the external architecture of the theatre continued the East Village atmosphere and did not contradict the sensation that one was part of a location famed for rebellion and intellectualism.

Since the lobby is the first space that the spectators inhabit after they enter the theatre building, it plays an extremely important role in the framing of the experience. Knowles writes that lobbies "are today perhaps even more significant than

entranceways in terms of their impact on the theatrical experience … particularly in their framing and preparing audience horizons of expectations" (71). The New York Theatre Workshop's small lobby, already cramped at 7:30 pm with people trying to get out of the cold, had little decoration besides a black and white sign with show times for *Homebody/Kabul* and a few quotes from reviews. There were no concessions being sold in the lobby, no fancy bar, or even coffee. The only amenity the lobby offered was a small, cramped washroom. This austerity emphasized a "downtown" feeling and highlighted the performance's off-Broadway nature. The lobby's décor and services were perfectly congruous with the Village location, and thus did not contradict the frame of a production that might defy the dominant ideology.

The auditorium was quite Spartan and egalitarian. There were two aisles, one on the left, and one on the right; there was no balcony. The walls, made of gray bricks, were unadorned walls. Carlson writes that "the selection of design elements, decorative motifs, and even colors [of the theatre auditorium] reveals something of any theatre's desired or actual public image" (*Theatre Semiotics* 46). For instance, "The possession of a box at the opera has traditionally been regarded in Western society as one of the most dependable signs of membership in the privileged classes" (Carlson *Theatre Semiotics* 45), but the New York Theatre Workshop did not boast such boxes. In fact, other than a slight rake, the 188 seats were all on the same level, and they all had more or less the same view of the stage. With this seating arrangement, and with tickets

at the uniform price of $60,[6] there was a certain equality demonstrated in the theatre's architecture. The seating arrangement further contributed to a sense of ideological equity—a critique lodged against the play by members of the conservative press who sought to privilege Western ideals (Fanger 19; B.D. Phillips W9).

The stage had a black curtain hiding the space behind the proscenium arch, so there was no preset to examine. The proscenium arch, however, was another signifying piece of architecture, for it "(as progenitor of the cinematic and televisual screen) is the closest thing that theatre has to an audience-stage relationship that contemporary English-language theatrical cultures considers to be 'normal,' and that theatre workers and audiences tend to take for granted" (Knowles 63). Since the proscenium is as close to "normal" as theatre architecture can be for English-language audience, there was no pre-show spectacle to engage the audience. This encouraged excitement about the impending show rather than from the intricate architecture or stage design.

In keeping with the modest façade, the lack of amenities in the lobby, the austere auditorium and proscenium arch, the program was simple. Not a glossy production full of ads, it was a stapled booklet of white paper and black print. The cover merely stated, "New York Theatre Workshop" in a small font with no logo; the inside cover gave the e-mail address of the artistic director, and invited "Questions? Comments?

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[6] $60 for a play was mid-range for theatre tickets in New York at that time; however, it was still six times what one could expect to pay for a movie, lending the otherwise egalitarian experience of seeing *Homebody/Kabul* some sense of elitism.

Suggestions?"; the third page simply stated the title and playwright; and the rest of the program was taken up by explanations of the theatre's artistic mission, bios, the artists involved with workshops, and the donors to the theatre (New York Theatre Workshop "*Homebody/Kabul* Program").

The last element that helped frame the production is one of the most difficult to quantify: the audience composition. Any actor or regular theatre-goer knows that shows vary from one night to the next depending on how an audience reacts to the performance. While this reaction cannot be measured exactly, there is one aspect of audience composition that can: the number of seats filled. Bennett writes that "the percentage of seats occupied will inevitably affect reception both through its effect on the quality of the actors' performances and through inter-spectator relations" (131). *Homebody/Kabul* sold out nearly every night in New York, and "when a theatre is at capacity, not only can this enhance an audience's confidence to respond to the performance, but it can also reaffirm the spectators' sense of themselves both individually and as a group" (Bennett 131). The filled auditorium probably helped reaffirm spectators' sense of belonging to a group of people seeing *Homebody/Kabul*; but what did it mean to be an individual member of a group of people at this particular play?

Repairing Reality

After the World Trade Center attacks, the media and the Bush administration forged a national narrative akin to a Hollywood movie where the blameless victim strikes back with uncontested virtue. Indeed, even those in New York who witnessed the events with their own eyes rather than mediated through television images "remarked in some way or another that the event seemed not like reality but like a disaster film… [so] it is hardly surprising that our imaginations should find that the almost inevitable point of reference" (Carlson "9/11" 3-4). Even if one did not find real life to be like a disaster film, Carlson argues that people began to find their "personal images eclipsed by the images that were the only visual source for most of the rest of the world, for whom the 'mediazation' of those images was present from the beginning" ("9/11" 4). These observations lead Carlson to his larger, convincing argument that

> films like *Independence Day* provided an immediate orienting scenario that almost at once could be seen reflected, if unacknowledged, through the media and certainly in the Bush Government. According to this scenario, a peaceful, peace-loving, and generally admirable and blameless America is suddenly subjected to a vicious and unprovoked attack by some alien power… The hitherto quiet and trusting United States, however, immediately mobilizes and eventually tracks down and destroys the evil aliens who were so unwise as to awaken this sleeping giant. ("9/11" 4)

The various film elements that television news employed in their coverage of the fall 2001 events helped to reinforce the action film framing. There were musical themes

relating first to the World Trade Center attacks, then to the "war on terror," and each news channel also had graphic icons associated with these topics. The Bush administration tapped into this discourse to help justify the U.S. military response, depicting Bush's sudden "conversion" from an unpopular leader to a man on a "crusade" against the "Darth Vader of our times," Osama bin Laden (Carlson "9/11" 4).

In an environment hostile to any narrative other than that which depicted the United States as "blameless," *Homebody/Kabul* became a lightning rod for public commentary of and about dissent. This is not surprising considering that the United States was in the midst of an ideological shift in which the Bush administration was rapidly arguing for a large-scale "war" against a tactic ("terrorism"), and dissent against this course of action was rare. Kushner was one of the few public intellectuals to say explicitly that the "war on terror" was not a war "in any sense" (M. Phillips "Art Imitates"). Kushner took up the unpopular argument that the World Trade Center attacks were not an act of war because they were not supported by a state, and that a "war" against "terror" was not possible because, again, terrorism is a tactic not a nation.

Art is often the focal point of ideological shifts, the means by which such social movements are made visible and negotiated (R. Williams 197), and Kushner's outspoken opposition to the new "war on terror" rhetoric, combined with his topical play, made the media respond to *Homebody/Kabul* as if it were an alternative to the Bush administration's rhetoric. Here was an opportunity for a mainstream production to

enable dominant ideology to absorb and take on an emergent ideology (Bull 134). But how exactly could *Homebody/Kabul* have accomplished that ideological work? As Raymond Williams indicates, art and literature can be seen "as a social formation of a specific kind which may in turn be seen as the articulation (often the only fully available articulation) of structures of feeling which as living processes are much more widely experienced" (197). A "structure of feeling," for Williams, is the nascent articulation of an emergent ideology, or an ideology that contests the current dominant ideology. Clifford Geertz argues that a work of art can "bring a particular cast of mind out into the world of objects, where men [and women] can look at it" (99). *Homebody/Kabul* allowed audience members to consider an emergent "cast of mind" whereby the United States was not entirely blameless for the Taliban's position of power in Afghanistan. But this did not happen in a static environment. Raymond Williams argues that such ideological shifts are never static, and that the threshold of ideological change is in constant flux in a structure of feeling. Williams writes that a structure of feeling is

> often indeed not yet recognized as social but taken to be private, idiosyncratic and even isolating, but which in analysis (though rarely otherwise) has its emergent, connecting and dominant characteristics, indeed its specific hierarchies. These are often more recognizable at a later stage, when they have been formalized, classified and in many cases built into institutions and formations. (197)

At the moment of *Homebody/Kabul*'s production, the "war on terror" rhetoric was clearly higher on the ideological hierarchy than Kushner's view that there could be no such

war. But the "war on terror" ideology was nevertheless emergent because the country's residents were still making sense of recent events. Therefore, while any expression against the "war on terror" was rare (and usually considered inappropriate), there was a (perhaps mistaken) sense that a competing ideology was articulated by *Homebody/Kabul*. Since *Homebody/Kabul* was framed as the only dissenting voice in theatre (and, indeed, in the entertainment media in general),[7] *Homebody/Kabul* became *the* site of cultural negotiation. If the mainstream media accepted the emergent ideology that the play was seen to suggest, the ideology that considered the "the war on terror" a war "in no sense" might have gained more prominence. But that did not happen in large part because this production did not represent mainstream theatre picking up on an already emergent ideology; instead, an emergent ideology became associated with a production that did not intend to argue its case.

This can all be seen in an analysis of the media reaction to *Homebody/Kabul*. One can also see that as the Bush administration's "war on terror" was being "formalized" and "built into institutions and formations" in United States government via the Patriot Act and other legislation and speeches and that anyone who held an opposing ideology was likely to feel "private, idiosyncratic" and, especially, "isolat[ed]" (R. Williams 197). This made *Homebody/Kabul* an especially important cultural site because—even if it was

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[7] For a more detailed analysis of the self-censorship that occurred after the World Trade Center attacks, see John Leland and Peter Marks, "New Look for Entertainment in a Terror-Conscious World," New York Times Sep 24 2001, Linda Winer, "What's Appropriate Now?," Newsday September 23, 2001.

not Kushner's intention—it was read and responded to as dissent against the Bush administration's rhetoric and actions. Because seventy-seven newspaper articles broadcast Kushner's alternative politics and related them to the play, this dissent had the potential to be voiced nationally, helping those that might otherwise feel "isolat[ed]" by their dissenting ideology to feel part of a dissenting community. If someone felt that he or she was the only person who did not agree with the Bush Administration's rhetoric, the reviews of *Homebody/Kabul* could have helped this person become aware that there were other people who also disagreed with the Bush Administration. The media coverage of the play is extremely important because it is a contemporaneous record of people's reactions to a dissenting ideology. Sometimes the reviews show how the dominant ideology negated a potential emergent ideology; sometimes they are expressions of a dissenting ideology.

According to media theorist James Carey, there are two ways to analyze a newspaper: using the transmission view of communication or the ritual view of communication. At the center of the transmission view of communication is "the transmission of signals or messages over distance for the purpose of control" (Carey 15). This view posits that the producer of communication has information, like a good to be transported, that is sent via the medium to the audience, who receives that information like a product. The ritual view of communication "is directed not toward the extension of messages in space but towards the maintenance of society in time; not the act of

imparting information but the representation of shared beliefs" (Carey 18). The goal is not to disseminate information as far as possible for reasons of control and persuasion, but instead to make society as unified as possible. Carey argues:

> This projection of community ideals and their embodiment in material form—dance, plays, architecture, news stories, strings of speech—creates an artificial though nonetheless real symbolic order that operates to provide not information but confirmation, not to alter attitudes or change minds but to represent an underlying order of things, not to perform functions but to manifest an ongoing and fragile social process. (19)

One can look at "news stories"—in this case, reviews of *Homebody/Kabul*—not as "information" that is disseminated to people outside the community of readers, but instead as "confirmation" to the already extant community of readers about how the play is related to the community's view of the "underlying order of things," which I have been referring to as one's "ideology."

Analyzing the Media Reaction Beyond Persuasion

In the early-twentieth century, theatre's political effects were judged by its ability to persuade. In the 1930s, this might have taken the form of evaluating whether a production of, say, *Waiting for Lefty* persuaded spectators that unions were beneficial for workers. In the late-twentieth century, however, evaluating theatre's political persuasiveness was much more likely to deal with whether the piece of theatre redefined what Stuart Hall called the "norms and definitions in a problematic or contested area of political life" (77). This is theatre scholar Peggy Phelan's approach in

her scholarly performance review of the New York Theatre Workshop's production of *Homebody/Kabul*. She finds Kushner's "political polemic" ("*Homebody/Kabul* Performance Review" 167) ultimately unpersuasive as an attempt to redefine the links between United States' foreign policy in Afghanistan and its relationship to terrorism because "despite Kushner's best intentions" to create a "leftist" piece of theatre, by "plac[ing] the United States as prime-mover everywhere and forever is to fall into the trap of considering it as it prefers to be considered: as only and forever the super-power" ("*Homebody/Kabul* Performance Review" 168). This is a valid close reading of whether the performance text is persuasive as an argument, but it does not exhaust the production's political potential.

Political effects of theatre (apart from persuasion) can be revealed through examining a production's media coverage: rather than asking if a review of a play persuaded readers of anything, one can ask whether the review re-defined the ideology of the readers. While a newspaper review of a play may not persuade readers of the play's ideology, one can ask if the ideologies of the readers needed to shift to include ideas or concepts that they did not previously acknowledge. This may not be the radical work scholars like Kershaw promote (*Radical* 16), but it is precisely the method through which mainstream theatre can extend beyond the theatre walls its ability to render emergent ideologies part of the dominant one (Bull 134).

Reviews of *Homebody/Kabul* were not merely giving their readers facts that they could acquire. They were allowing readers to join "a world of contending forces" (Carey 21), which in this case were competing narratives about how to make sense of geopolitics after the World Trade Center's destruction, and, importantly, how to deal with this play that was framed as the singular dissenting voice from the "war on terror" narrative in which the U.S. was a blameless victim. Carey writes that in general "news changes little from day to day" (21), but there are times when changes occur. In those moments "reality must be repaired" through ritual communication (Carey 30). The reviews analyzed here represent the scores of reviews written to attempt to "repair reality." I chose to focus on these particular examples because of their extremity; their ideologies are remarkably clear because of their rhetorical extremes, but they nonetheless represent larger samples of critical response by reviewers who saw the New York Theatre Workshop production of the play.

For the reviews of *Homebody/Kabul* that support the nascent "war on terror" ideology (with its view of a blameless United States) and therefore disagree with the emergent ideology of *Homebody/Kabul*, there are two ways to fit Kushner into their narrative: envelope his dissenting view that rejects a "blameless" United States, or excommunicate him from rational thought. The first technique (enveloping) is best represented by an article in *The Weekly Standard* by John Podhoretz, a regular columnist for *The New York Post*. The very title of his stunning review begins the work of

incorporating Kushner's play into his world view: "Even an America-hater Has His Limits" (21). Podheretz writes that while Kushner may hate America, even Kushner cannot truly doubt America's innocence and right to retaliate. Podheretz quotes Kushner saying that New Yorkers are "less hawkish" and are not "in lock step behind" Bush (21), and then contradicts these supposedly out of touch views by invoking scenes of New Yorkers chanting "USA! USA!" at ground zero and Bush's response that "the people who knocked these buildings down will hear from us soon" (Bush "9/14/2001"). Podheretz calls Kushner "isolated… in those coffeehouse conversations with the world's oldest living Bolsheviks" (23). But, says Podhoretz, "Kushner is actually trying to teach the world in 'Homebody/Kabul' – that there existed in the world a regime of sadistic barbarity, a fanatical regime that could not be reasoned or negotiated with, that could only be destroyed" (22). Podhoretz is speaking here of the need to destroy the Taliban, but nowhere in *Homebody/Kabul* is there a discussion of the destruction of the Taliban. Podhoretz sums up his take on the play: "It means that when it comes to the face of evil in Afghanistan, some truths are so obvious even the most determined anti-American leftist can't miss them" (22). With this review Podhoretz, rightly or wrongly, brings Kushner into the fold of those who think the Taliban must be destroyed. Iris Fanger mirrored Podhoretz's technique in the *Christian Science Monitor* when she wrote, "What gives the play added urgency is Kushner's dramatization of the desperation of people living under a totalitarian regime and how survival comes to supersede any

moral laws" (19). Fanger argues that Kushner's play shows that—whether it is their fault or not—the residents of Afghanistan lost all respect for "moral laws" under the Taliban, and the "peace-loving" United States has no choice but to destroy "those people," though it is unclear whether she is calling for the destruction of the Taliban or the Afghan populace. These reviews interpellate the audience into an ideology where there is no dissent from the Bush administration's decision to attack Afghanistan.

The most common way of approaching Kushner's dissent, however, was simply to excommunicate him from the world of rational thought. The easiest way to do this was to charge him with the crime of highlighting Western culpability. Mark Steyn writes in the *New Criterion* that "Kushner is inverting the perspective of traditional Imperial drama: the English are the primitive exotics, the Afghans are cultured, educated, artistic, urbane, articulate, poets, and librarians, masters of all the virtues the metropolitan power once claimed for itself" (38). According to Steyn's view, Kushner is comparable to "the left's 'peace movement'" which "got nowhere after September 11th… because they were obvious know-nothings, the lame generalities of their demo placards untroubled by anything so tiresome as a verifiable fact about the region" (41). And, while Kushner has "taken the trouble to unearth ten-thousand facts" he still "has as little to say as the ignoramuses [of the peace-movement]" (41). Because Kushner does not see the Afghans as alien, and, indeed gives them characteristics that are not only

recognizably human but civilized, he has missed the crucial "fact about the region," and therefore his play has nothing to say.

Likewise, as notable a critic as Robert Brustein, writing for *The New Republic,* declares, "With the exception of the Homebody, all of the Western characters are singularly unappealing, and the occasional anti-Western sentiments that we overhear suggest that this is deliberate" ("Angels in Afghanistan" 27). In the end, Brustein argues that "thanks to the Homebody, we leave the theater having learned a lot more about Afghanistan than we knew when we came. But it is knowledge that has not been sufficiently rooted in the human events of the play or the events of recent history" ("Angels in Afghanistan" 27). It is strange that Brustein learned so much from the Homebody whose knowledge of Afghanistan comes from an outdated guidebook. And while the second two acts give a much more current picture of Afghanistan, they apparently teach Brustein little for he suggests that these portions do not take into account "the events of recent history."

Barbara Phillips, writing for *The Wall Street Journal,* reports that "perhaps the most potent buzz generator [for the play] was the widespread belief of prophecy. Somehow Mr. Kushner had 'predicted' the Sept. 11 attack on the World Trade Center" (B. D. Phillips W9). Phillips goes on to say that

> Mr. Kushner couldn't leave well enough alone. Opening his play in a neighborhood recently closed to nonresidents for security reasons, this avowed leftist, gay-activist critic of America feels obliged in the preface to

> his script to quote from an Oct. 13 article in the New York Times about the destruction wrought by an errant American bomb. (W9)

For *The Wall Street Journal*'s conservative community of readers, 2001 was not the time, if there ever was one, to be a "critic of America." Phillips cites one of Kushner's acknowledgements: "Kimberly T. Flynn 'was busy during this production trying to save New York City from our pesticide-profligate mayor-poisoner'" (W9), then goes on to say that "you know the villain better as the hero of these past few months, Rudy Giuliani" (W9). Phillips does not explain that Kimberly T. Flynn is a dramaturg who worked with Kushner in the past, nor does she elucidate how Flynn was trying to "save" New York City from Giuliani, or what this has to do with the New York Theatre Workshop's production of *Homebody/Kabul*. But her review does emphasize the supposed heroism of the conservative Giuliani, and shows that the community of readers of *The Wall Street Journal* is locked in battle with this "avowed leftist, gay-activist critic of America" intent on criticizing a conservative "hero" like Giuliani (B. D. Phillips W9).

The most dramatic excommunication of Kushner, however, takes place in the *USA Today* review written by Elysa Gardner. She begins the review by describing a dream she had in which she attends the play with Donald Rumsfield, George W. Bush's hawkish Secretary of Defense. In her dream, Rumsfield "bellows" against this "irreverence" and yells that it is "an affront to everything our brave young people are

fighting for abroad" (D.09). Upon awakening, her first impulse is to defend Kushner, but after a moment she

> then decided [her] dream date may have had a point… in trying to illustrate the historical and political complexities behind Afghanistan's suffering… [Kushner] ultimately makes the Afghan characters more sympathetic, and more interesting, than the Anglos, who are portrayed as nattering, navel-gazing substance abusers and misanthropes. (D.09)

Once again, the fact that the Westerners are not central to the narrative and not portrayed as paragons of righteousness is Kushner's offense. This offense makes the official view—in this case actually represented by a subconscious internalization of a government official—supersede Kushner's.

These reviews suggest that Kushner and those who disagree with the Bush administration's response to the World Trade Center attacks are "obvious know-nothings" at best (Steyn 41), "an affront" to United States soldiers at worst (Gardner D.09). They interpellate their readers into an ideology where any dissent from the Bush administration's "war on terror" rhetoric is irrational or non-existent. This shows the political importance of reviews of mainstream theatre. If *Homebody/Kabul* articulated an emergent ideology and the press reported it as a viable, mainstream alternative to the "war on terror" ideology, the emergent ideology would have immediately been presented to a national audience of readers beyond the spectators of the play. In these examples, though, it is either suggested that the production fit perfectly into the dominant ideology or was completely irrational. This severely limited the ability of the

emergent ideology to be read outside the theatre. However, this performance produced polarized reviews, and these examples of media coverage that sympathized with the dominant ideology hardly exhaust the political work done in the press surrounding *Homebody/Kabul*.

In a strange exception to the reviews that either support or disagree with the Bush administration's handling of geopolitics, Ben Brantley's discussion in the *New York Times* focuses on the fact that the play is set in 1998 and that, therefore, the Homebody's opening monologue is now out of date, from "a perspective that opens and stimulates the imagination, focusing newly virgin eyes on a nation [Afghanistan] that now dominates American news" (E1). He writes that this perspective is eventually able to create "a fusion of politics, poetry and boundless empathy transformed through language into passionate, juicy theater" (Brantley E1). Just what the "politics" *are* in the play remains a mystery; Brantley never explicitly talks about them. The whole review is an aesthetic analysis, with unspecified "politics" being one interesting part of "juicy theater." *The New York Times* does not address the world outside the play via contemporaneous events (which are so present throughout the play's accidental references to them), but instead refers to the world outside the play via its literary allusions. Brantley writes, "In fact, 'Homebody/Kabul' could be titled 'A Passage to Afghanistan.' Mr. Kushner is, in a sense, a postcolonial heir to the liberal tradition of Forster" (E1). In what is arguably the most influential newspaper in the United States

(especially when it comes to theatre coverage), this review is singular in its avoidance of contemporaneous events. Every other one of the seventy-seven reviews of the production mention (either explicitly or obliquely) the World Trade Center attacks or the war in Afghanistan. Brantely's more literary review of the play interpellates the reader into an ideology where the play is part of "the liberal tradition" of *belle lettres*, but no part of the contemporaneous discussion of a proper reaction to the recent attacks. This shows how even a sympathetic and positive review can extinguish political potential by simply eliding the contemporaneous moment.

Most of the reviews that are sympathetic to an ideology in opposition to the Bush administration nevertheless criticize the dramaturgical and literary merits of the play. A notable exception is a review by John Heilpern in the *New York Observer* that begins with a brief background of the play: "[*Homebody/Kabul*] was written before Sept. 11 (and Mr. Kushner has always taken an interest in a world beyond the safely, cozily bourgeois)" ("Kushner's Great" A1). By implicitly criticizing "the safe, cozily bourgeois" world of the middle-class West, Heilpern suggests approval for *Homebody/Kabul* by writing that Kushner "must be doing something right when *The Wall Street Journal* dismisses *Homebody/Kabul* as something sordid" (("Kushner's Great" A1). Heilpern declares that he is "celebrating Tony Kushner's great new play of our anguished times" (Heilpern A17). The review finishes: "we, too, need to better understand the world and grieve under its convulsive, weary weight" (Heilpern "Kushner's Great" A17). Like the

attacks in the *Wall Street Journal*, Heilpern's gushing commendations seem to have little to do with the play. He emphasizes instead the difficulty of our times and makes Kushner, not Giuliani, a hero, precisely for the act of criticizing the supposed "damned" of the "bourgeois" West and for provoking the *Wall Street Journal*.

In other reviews that are sympathetic toward an ideology that resists the Bush administration's "war on terror," the most common strategy is to praise the play (whatever its dramaturgical shortcomings) for its accurate portrayal of the characters and their political situation. Michael Feingold of *The Village Voice* writes that "as for the nature and causes of that trouble [the World Trade Center attacks], politically [Kushner] has them pegged… that Westerners (and in particular Americans) don't approach the rest of the world in its own terms or make the effort to perceive it from its own point of view" ("Disorientalism" 60). In direct contrast to trying to push Kushner's point of view outside the bounds of rational thought, Feingold embraces it as absolutely correct, and uses it to criticize Americans even though there are no Americans in the play. Likewise, Julia M. Klein in *The Chronicle for Higher Education* finds that "some of the play's best scenes, played with fine comic restraint and camaraderie by [Dylan] Baker and [Bill] Camp, involve the pair sharing political insights and drugs— another form of traveling" (B20). This is a far cry from the concerns in other reviews that the Westerners are unsympathetic junkies (B.D. Phillips W9). *The Nation*'s review by Elizabeth Pochoda even finds that the Homebody, the one character the more conservative reviews found

amiable, is "dangerously charming because the question remains: What exactly does a person do when faced with a calamity of historic proportions? When we are so overwhelmed, she says, we succumb to luxury" (35). This is particularly interesting since Bush's advice to United States citizens after the attacks was to go shopping and to visit Disney World (Bush "9/27/2001"). Pochoda finds that the one "charming" Western character represents the dominant ideology's solution to "a calamity of historic proportions," and the readers of her review are interpellated into her ideology of dissent.

Richard Christiansen directly contradicts the action movie rhetoric of "us versus them" when he writes in the *Chicago Tribune* that "'Homebody/Kabul' is not about good people versus bad people. It is a play about people caught in a clash of cultures that has corroded and corrupted the network of our humanity" (5.3). Michael Phillips' review in the *Los Angeles Times* states that "Kushner's play is clearly not on the side of the Taliban, though it takes pains to humanize (or at least not demonize) what these bumbling English citizens abroad see as The Other" ("Response" A5). He also writes that a refusal to make geopolitics a matter of us versus them "isn't the sort of thing many Americans want to confront right now, as the war on terrorism wears on. And yet, the world premiere's run has already been extended through Feb. 10" ("Response" A5). While Phillips is interested in the phenomenon of *Homebody/Kabul's* popularity, he

does not or cannot explain what he sees as a contradiction: that here is a mainstream play positing potential American blame and the Taliban's humanity.

This contradiction is easily explained, however, when one considers that this play was being treated by the media as the one piece of theatre in the fall of 2001 that resisted the Bush administration's "war on terror" rhetoric. Indeed, with the cancellation of movies, TV shows, and the toning down of everything from internet sites to late night talk-shows, *Homebody/Kabul* may have been the only mainstream entertainment to contradict the official narrative. Reading about the play's popularity in Phillips' review interpellated the reader into an ideology where there are many people (or at least enough to extend the run of a production in New York) that in fact *do* want to confront a view of geopolitics more complex than "us versus them" ("Response" A5).

This is seen even more clearly when James Reston Jr., analyzing the play in *American Theatre*, writes that the Afghan characters "speak most pointedly to the situation America now faces in Central Asia" and that because of the play "we see how atrocity is possible, everywhere, by anyone, for any reason" (50). This, again, goes against the official narrative of Afghans as alien monsters, to be destroyed not understood. Reston also writes that "all fall, the newspapers and news-magazines had been confounded by Arab wrath… What the theatre can display better than any other medium is passion. This includes the passion of the Arab religious fanatic and the passion of his most immediate victim" (52). Perhaps *Homebody/Kabul* displayed the

"passion" at the heart of "Arab wrath" that so confused the U.S. news media with its countless stories on "Why do they hate us?"

If theatre can indeed portray passion better than CNN and editorial pages, then it makes sense that people would seek out relevant theatre in times of change, especially if that change was caused by people's "wrath." Perhaps timely theatre offers a way to make manifest a "structure of feeling." While theatre that contradicts the official narrative might be uncomfortable for some to watch, it would surely be proportionately comforting to those who struggle against the official narrative. If, as Reston describes *Homebody/Kabul*, "we see no American flags fluttering on this stage, hear no macho one-liners from a Wild West American president" and if "this is a play for those who are interested in the root causes that proceeded Sept. 11, for those who can see through the fog of patriotism to the finer distinctions, who are finally ready to ask how on earth do we get out of this godforsaken place, who can bear to contemplate the thought that we have participated to some extent in our own tragedy" (53), then it was singular in the mainstream theatre in New York City in the fall of 2001. That singularity is extremely important in questioning why people chose to see the production.

Phillips states that the sold out run of the play is "surprising" because the play contained views that "many Americans [did not] want to confront" ("Response" A5). But its singularity, the fact that *Homebody/Kabul* was the one piece of mainstream theatre one could see in New York where an opposing ideology was made manifest in art,

makes the response quite logical. It was because of these views that people saw the play: views which may or may not be in the text, but were framed by the journalism surrounding the play, by the East Village location with its history of rebellion and intellectualism, by the advertising focusing on the reviews, by the theatre's "blank" architecture and program that did not contradict the horizon of expectations that audiences brought to the play, and most importantly by Kushner's leftist comments during interviews that were collapsed into the play's reviews. Because of all these frames, spectators' horizons of expectations were focused on the play's supposed relation to current events and on its supposedly oppositional ideology. The production's success was not in spite of its opposition to the dominant ideology, but because of it.

Did media coverage of *Homebody/Kabul* force public discourse to incorporate an ideology that dissented from the "war on terror" rhetoric? The community of readers of the *Wall Street Journal* did not have its conservative ideology challenged by the *Wall Street Journal* review of *Homebody/Kabul*. However, in its review of the play, the *Wall Street Journal* did acknowledge that not everyone agreed that Giuliani was a hero and that there were those who stood outside the supposed unity surrounding Bush as he took the U.S. to war in Afghanistan. Judging from the harsh language of the *Wall Street Journal*'s review, having to acknowledge these facts was enough to make its reviewer (and perhaps its community of readers) angry at the supposed "Taliban" playwright,

Tony Kushner (B.D. Phillips W9). However, since the "war on terror" ideology clearly became dominant in the months following the production (if it was not already), any challenge *Homebody/Kabul* may have posed was either slight or effectively undercut. This makes the production an important case study for this dissertation because it shows that topicality, media coverage and supposed support of an emergent ideology are not enough to successfully integrate that ideology into the dominant one. One conclusion from this example: it is potentially more politically efficacious if a newspaper harshly takes issue with a play's politics (especially if the article specifically mentions what the politics are) than if the paper ignores politics altogether, as in *The New York Times* review of *Homebody/Kabul*. Political effects of reviews that disagree with the play's ideology are explored more fully in the chapter devoted to *The Normal Heart*. The chapter on *Angels in America* explores what happens when the majority of the press coverage (implicitly or explicitly) accepts a play's emergent ideology. The media response to both those plays produced a stronger challenge to the dominant ideology than that of *Homebody/Kabul*, but, taken together, these case studies create a picture of how varied press reactions produce varied ideological effects. We now move on to a close reading of the performance text itself.

Performing Mourning

Well into the second act of *Homebody/Kabul*, one of the characters, an Afghan woman living in 1998 under the Taliban, says to a British character, "You love the

Taliban so much, bring them to New York! Well, don't worry, they're coming to New York!" (Kushner *Homebody* 85). When I saw the play in January 2002, this produced an audible gasp from spectators, then there was silence broken by quiet sounds of scattered crying around me. Only a few months after the World Trade Center attacks, the words were like daggers.

Because the New York Theatre Workshop was in the same city and relatively close to where the World Trade Center towers stood (much more so than Broadway, for instance), because the attacks occurred only a few months prior, and because the media coverage condensed Kushner's dissenting political views and the play into one statement, it was impossible not to frame *Homebody/Kabul* as a critique of the United States' reaction to the World Trade Center attacks and the subsequent invasion of Afghanistan. Because of all these factors, the performance text's relation to world events was underscored.

In the first act, which in the New York Theatre Workshop production was a long monologue given by the Homebody of the title,[8] the relation to world events is seen through the monologue's connection to colonialist discourse and images. In the second and third acts, which follow the Homebody's husband and daughter as they attempt to claim her body in Afghanistan, the placement of the action in Afghanistan and

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[8] In subsequent drafts of the play, including the published versions, the first act does not end with her monologue; instead, it transitions into the first scene in Afghanistan.

moments of dialogue between characters regarding the vexed relationship between the West and Middle East create the underscored moments. It was in these underscored moments that Brechtian alienation occurred.

Jane Tompkins writes that "an individual's perceptions and judgments are a function of the assumptions shared by the group he [or she] belongs to" (xxi). Thus, examining my reactions to a performance of *Homebody/Kabul* in 2002 will also allow for an examination of the "assumptions shared" by the group to which I belonged. That group, judging from the reviews, was one that found *Homebody/Kabul* to be a critique of the Bush administration's "war on terror" rhetoric (Christiansen; Feingold "Disorientalism"; M. Phllips "Response"; Pochoda; Reston). Though I now am skeptical that the play's text does this, at the time, because of the frames through which I saw it—including reviews, my admiration of Kushner, my desire not to feel alone with my dissenting ideology, and the East Village locale—my reaction to the play was based on those assumptions. By analyzing my reaction to the performance text of the New York Theatre Workshop's production of *Homebody/Kabul* and assuming that I was part of a like-minded group, I will also be interrogating the reactions of that like-minded group. By doing so, I intend to show how perceptions of the play's structure, content and production were drastically effected by a spectator's perception of it being about contemporaneous events. This type of analysis will not be possible in the chapters on *The Normal Heart* and *Angels in America* because I did not see the productions, but

analyzing *Homebody/Kabul* in this way and showing my relationship to the reviews with which I agree will allow me, in the subsequent chapters, to use reviews as representative of a group of like-minded spectators. From these reviews and reports of performances, I will be able to re-create the performances and analyze them from the perspectives of several different groups.

One of fiction's main differences from "real life" is that fiction cannot be part of our world because it does not exist in "our time." Several years can pass in a play's fictional timeline while only a couple hours pass in the timeline of the audience. The accidental references to current events in *Homebody/Kabul* continually made the audience aware of their own time.[9] In this sense, the audience was continually alienated from the "time" of the play.

Though in large part accidental, this alienation was remarkably Brechtian, but by "alienation" I do not mean an emotional detachment from the production. Rather, by alienation I mean keeping the audience aware of theatre's artificiality. While this term is proposed by Brecht in an article referring to Chinese acting, Min Tian rightly points out that Brecht's theories owe more to the Russian scholar Shklovsky than Chinese acting (Tian 203). But Shklovsky argued that art should "make strange" in order to make

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[9] Current events are not the only factors keeping the audience aware of its own timeline in *Homebody/Kabul*. The self-conscious writing, particularly in the Homebody's monologue, does so as well. One could interrogate the way the Homebody's monologue plays with time alongside and within the accidental references to current events by using the work of Deborah R. Geis, Postmodern Theatric(k)S: Monologue in Contemporary American Drama (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1995).

viewers *more* aware and connected to life. That is, art should not make the viewer feel detached from the world. Shklovsky writes, "art exists to help us recover the sensation of life; it exists to make us feel things, to make the stone *stoney*" (qtd. in Scholes 48). In other words, the strangeness of art awakens us to sensations dulled by habit.

Tian also writes that Brecht was never able to keep emotion out of his productions, and, as already noted regarding the audience's reaction to the line from *Homebody/Kabul* about bringing the Taliban to New York, this play sparked a highly emotional reception, especially during the moments of connection to contemporaneous events. Those moments were when spectators were most aware that they were watching theatre because their attention was inevitably torn between the story being told on-stage and current events. This emotional engagement in the face of alienation is perhaps best explained in an article by Craig Kinzer and Mary Poole.

After Kinzer and Poole ran Method-trained actors through some Brechtian exercises with an audience present, the spectators reported that they were made more aware of the actor and his or her dilemmas than when watching the scene performed in the tradition of the Method. The newfound awareness of the actor did not make the audience emotionally disengage from the production; instead, the new relation to the actor was described by the spectators as "chummy" (Kinzer and Poole 82). In fact, Kinzer and Poole observed "the audience's acceptance of the open display of the actor/mask established an unexpected rapport, and the actors sensed immediate access

to the audience" (82). This rapport is explained as follows: "The experience of actors and spectators implies that the key to Brecht's notion of alienation can be viewed less as a question of *increasing* the distance between actor and character as *decreasing* the distance between actor and audience" (82). The description of alienation "decreasing the distance between actor and audience" accurately describes what happened during *Homebody/Kabul*. The accidental references to current events drew one's awareness out of the "reality of fiction" and into the "reality of life"; these moments made one aware of one's position as spectator. In that moment of "alienation" when the act of seeing theatre was "made strange," the distance between the audience and the actor decreased. The audience and actors came together emotionally at heightened moments such as when the Afghan character declared the Taliban were coming to New York. In this sense, the actors and spectators participated in an act of ritual mourning, when suddenly everyone in the room was aware of time outside of fiction and cognizant of how the words spoke to the recent tragedies in the U.S. and Afghanistan.

Commodity Magic and Colonial Fantasies

Act I, as performed in New York in 2001-02, was an hour-long monologue. The house was full nearly every night, and when the audience took their seats, they could see nothing but a plain black curtain. After a recorded voice reminded the audience to turn off cell phones, unwrap candy, and refrain from taking photographs, the houselights faded to black.

After a moment, soft lights came up on the Homebody sitting in a wooden chair with a paper bag to her left and a small table with a green cloth on it to her right. Two stacks of books rested on the table along with a table lamp with a beige, tasseled shade and wooden base. The Homebody was dressed in a brown, slightly patterned skirt, lavender blouse, purple sweater, and pearls. She held a hardback book and occasionally drank from a mug of tea that rested on the table. Her short hair was brushed back from her face. Her tone of speaking was very conversational. Rather than emphasize the text's rhythm and multisyllabic words, she spoke to the audience in a way that seemed confidential and conspiratorial.

The Homebody's monologue began with her reading to the audience from an outdated guidebook to Kabul. Her monologue was fragmented and full of digressions, and she returned again and again to the words in the book. Before she told the audience why she was so fascinated with the 1965 Afghanistan that the guidebook represented, she told us about planning a party for her husband which she expected to be a failure. She said:

> one would like something combustible at a party, something catalytic, some fizz, each element triggering transformation in all the other elements till all elements, which is to say, *guests*, are… surprising to themselves and return home feeling less… less certain of… those certainties which…

> *Because* of which, for example, powerful antidepressants are consumed.[10] (5)

By using the pronoun "one," she included her fictional audience and us, the real audience, in her direct address. She assumed that this "transformation" was what we would like at a party as well. To enact this transformation, she decided that the party needed hats. Not just any hats: Afghan hats. She gave no conscious reason for choosing Afghan hats, but perhaps she intuited what Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett writes in *Destination Culture*, that "the everyday lives of others are perceptible precisely because what they take for granted is not what we take for granted" and that "such encounters force us to make comparisons that pierce the membrane of our own quotidian world, allowing us for a brief moment to be spectators of ourselves" (48). The hats, common in Afghanistan but exotic to the Homebody and her guests, might provide that crucial self-comparison that would allow guests to be "less certain" of their own "certainties."

Regardless of her motive, the hats "are a brilliant success:" "the guests exchange them while dancing, kaleidoscopic and self-effacing and I think perhaps to our surprise in some small way meltingly intimate, someone else's hat atop your head, making your scalp stiffen at the imagined strangeness" (Kushner *Homebody* 18). This "kaleidoscopic" success was a raced and classed mimicry of the East by privileged Westerners. Their mimetic similarity to the subjugated population of Afghanistan created the desired

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[10] Many grammar irregularities and ellipses exist in the script to give actors a sense of timing; rather than place [*sic*] within almost every quote, I leave the grammar "mistakes" unnoted.

uncertainty about themselves by producing slippage in their everyday roles as the Western privileged class. Because the exotic quality of the hats made strange their everyday roles, their cross-dressing allowed their formal British manners to give way to an experience that was "self-effacing" and "meltingly intimate." Kirshenblatt-Gimblett calls this "the museum effect" and says it "can be triggered by a simple 'turn of the head' which bifurcates the viewer's gaze between the exotic"—in this case represented by the hats—"and [the viewer's view of] her own everyday world" (50). The Homebody's late-twentieth-century middle-class British "everyday world" was made exotic by the foreign hats.

The Homebody's "everyday world" is similar to how Anne McClintock describes the role of colonial British women: "ambiguously complicit both as colonizers and colonized, privileged and restricted, acted upon and acting" (6). The Homebody, while financially privileged, described her state as an "essential surfeit of inconsequence" and said, "I live with the world's utter indifference, which I have always taken to be a form of censure-in-potentia" (3). She was present but inconsequential, and her husband threatened to leave her when her speech interrupted his life. But, as she said onstage to us, "I speak… I can't help myself" (3). She was for her husband "something rejected from which one does not part," Kristeva's definition of the "abject" (qtd in McClintock 71). Her husband has rejected her, but does not leave. Her paradoxical privilege and restriction is played out in her abjection. While she has the kind of material comfort and

security of which most people in the world can only dream, she is restricted from full access to an emotionally meaningful and engaged relationship with her family. Since she appeared onstage to have no career or interest beyond words and outdated books, she did not have the kind of power through money or agency through career choices as her husband. Thus her privilege was mitigated by a dependence on a husband who has rejected her.

The Homebody recognized that her oppression was not the same as living in the kingdoms of, in her words, "Rickets and Untreated Gum Disease and High Infant Mortality Rates" (Kushner *Homebody* 10), and that in her moment in history, 1998, "In Afghanistan today I would be shrouded entirely in a *burqa*, I should be subject to *hejab*, I should live in terror of the *sharia hudud*, or more probably dead, unregenerate chatterer that I am" (13). She was, nevertheless, subject to her husband's demands that she not speak, that she should be seen and not heard, to make use of the colonial discourse that equated the oppressed with children. She summed up her abjection thus: "Home. Where stands the homebody, safe in her kitchen, on her culpable shore, suffering uselessly, watching others perishing in the sea, wringing her plump little maternal hands, oh, oh. Never *joining* the drowning… she… succumbs. To luxury" (17). She felt that her privileged class and country created the circumstances that lead to such things as kingdoms of "High Infant Mortality Rates," but because she was comfortable in her lifestyle, she did not attempt to help others.

Instead, she bought foreign hats. While hats were actually purchased according to her story, there was a tremendous element of fantasy for her in the transaction. She had no idea of the nationality of the man who sold her the hats, but she decided that he was from Afghanistan. It was onto him and his injured hand that she displaced her contradictory privilege and powerlessness.

When she gave him her credit card to pay for the hats, she saw that three of his fingers were cut off diagonally along the knuckles from pinky, to ring, to middle finger. She gestured onstage to demonstrate to the audience, bending the three of her fingers to simulate his injury. She admitted, "I know nothing of this hand, its history, of course, nothing" (11), but for her the damaged hand stood for Afghanistan, the country from which she desired the shopkeeper to originate. She told us that after she bought the hats, she did research on Kabul, mostly using an outdated guidebook. She had no interest in reality, in the actual nationality of the shopkeeper, or what Afghanistan was like in her own time. She was building a fantasy.

When she told the audience about signing the receipt, she moved completely into her daydream. She said she was suddenly "able to speak perfect Pashtu," and that she noticed the shopkeeper was very beautiful because of the visible marks of, as she puts it, "some life unimaginably more difficult than my own" (13). In her fantasy, she asked what happened to his hand, and she imagined many answers, all horrible, blaming everyone from the Mujahideen to the Russians. She then placed a heartbreaking elegy

to Kabul in the shopkeeper's mouth. This was late in the monologue, nearly forty-five minutes in, and the whole time she was sitting in a chair, speaking calmly. But during this fantasized elegy to Kabul, spoken in the voice of the shopkeeper, her voice rose in pitch and intensity. This speech was the only time she seemed angry, and she created a character to speak it based on a man she exoticized. She could only be angry when speaking in the voice of an impoverished male; this suggests that she felt that she, a privileged white woman, had nothing about which to be angry and no agency to express any anger she might nevertheless feel. This speech is worth quoting at length since it is the only moment in the forty-five minute monologue where she displayed any anger:

> *Look, look at my country, look at my Kabul, my city, what is left of my city? The streets are as bare as the mountains now, the buildings are as ragged as mountains and as bare and empty of life, there is no life here only fear, we do not live in the buildings now, we live in terror in the cellars in the caves in the mountains, only God can save us now, only order can save us now, only God's Law harsh and strictly administered can save us now, only The Department for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice can save us now, only terror can save us from ruin, only neverending war, save us from terror and neverending war, save my wife they are stoning my wife, they are chasing her with sticks, save my wife save my daughter from punishment by God, save us from God, from war, from exile, from oil exploration, from no oil exploration, from the West, from the children with rifles, carrying stones, only children with rifles, carrying stones, can save us now*. You will never understand. (Kushner *Homebody* 14, italics in original)

Her speed of her speech and the volume of her voice both increased to the peak of "You will never understand." In a steady, fast paced manner, the Homebody performed this speech but never left her seat. She took the audience on a whirlwind journey of

Afghanistan's problems, and her delivery of this speech had a hard, insistent rhythm.[11] She stated the point of view of "Afghanistan" as she (and the type of middle-class Westerner she represents) imagined it, full of horrible pleas and contradictory wishes. But these were not the words of a person from Afghanistan. While her speech was compelling, she remained a white British woman in conservative dress sitting in the fragmented representation of a lovely, comfortable room. It was a representation of a Western woman using a representation of an Eastern man to express her fears (and fantasies). The monologue was so compelling precisely because it was an expression of the audience's fantasy of life in Afghanistan, a tragic fantasy expressed in a comfortable room (meaning, for us, a comfortable theatre).

Lest we feel guilty about our shared privilege and our expensive $60-a-seat fantasies of how horrible life is in Afghanistan, the Homebody continued: "I have nothing to say about guilt, or culpability, for we are all culpable" (14). Culpable for what? For the horrors in Afghanistan? For the World Trade Center attacks only a few months before? She went on,

> Our own individual degrees of culpability being entirely bound up in our correspondent degrees of action, malevolent or not, well-intended or otherwise; or in our correspondent degrees of inertia, which can be taken as a form of malevolent action if you've a mind to see it that way. I do… These hats thus arrayed are not thus arrayed so as to be generative of

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[11] It must be said that Linda Emond's compelling acting as The Homebody was one of the reasons the monologue was so engaging.

> guilt, which in these our present circumstances, is no more morally useful or impressive than adult nappie rash. (Kushner *Homebody* 14)

She chastised us about how very grandiose it would be to feel guilty about world events. But was this truly what she meant? After all, this is the same character that punishes herself for "succumbing to luxury" and not "joining the drowning." What are we to make of this contradiction?

In her fantasy about buying hats, the shopkeeper led her out of the London shop and into a garden in Kabul where they made love. She said, "he places his hand inside me, it seems to me his whole hand inside me, and it seems to me a whole hand" (16). Her sexual fantasy takes the broken and makes it whole; but her desire is not to make the East whole. Instead, she fetishizes this man in order to feel whole herself.

Peggy Phelan explains Freud's idea of "fetishization" by writing, "unable to bear (sexual) difference, the psychic subject transforms this difference into the Same, and converts the Other into the familiar grammar of the linguistic, visual and physical body of the Same" (*Unmarked* 5-6). The Homebody fetishizes the shopkeeper, exotic in his suffering and physically lacking fingers, by making him the same as her. She fantasizes that he uses "familiar grammar" by imagining that she can understand his language and that his physical body is like hers by imagining he has a "whole" hand. She gives him her abjection by placing him in a cast-off, ignored land and gives him her privilege by making him her guide and sexual dominator. McClintock describes the use of fetishization in the nineteenth century to resolve the contradictions of being privileged

and powerless, and, to paraphrase McClintock, the Homebody displaces onto the shopkeeper the contradictions that she cannot resolve on a personal level (184). Her personal contradictions are resolved when she feels the lacking hand is "whole" and wholly inside her. She makes it whole and contains it. This resolution is ultimately taking place for the audience as well, and it is why the monologue feels so satisfying; later, the second two acts will seem less satisfying because they refuse to fetishize Afghanistan. In this sense, the Homebody is a surrogate for the audience. Just as she paid for hats in order to have a fantasy about the shopkeeper, the audience has paid for tickets to have a fantasy shown to them about the Afghanistan. When the play's second two acts do not portray the fetishized Kabul of the Homebody's imagination, reviews and audience members complain that the second two acts are less satisfying.

At the end of her fantasy about the shopkeeper, the Homebody literally paid for it by handing the shopkeeper the signed credit card receipt. Because of her money, the shop was an arena where the Homebody was in control and was able to observe and "buy" her fetish. To again borrow from McClintock, the Homebody was an "urban explorer… robbing the discovered classes of originatory authority and erasing their power to represent themselves" (McClintock 184). She decided that the shopkeeper was Afghan and decided what his story was.

Another definition is one that approaches "fetish" as a magical object. The Homebody claimed early in the monologue that her society no longer believes in magic,

but W.J.T. Mitchell writes "the deepest magic of the commodity fetish is its denial that there is anything magical about it" (qtd in McClintock 227). There is indeed something magical about her ability to transport herself into her fantasy solely through buying hats. There is also something equally horrible about her ability to commodify the man and his hats to the point of fantasized sexual fulfillment.

The Homebody assumed her audience shared or at least understood this ability, but she also assumed we would not see it as "magic." Whoever the Homebody imagined her fictional audience to be (and that remained ambiguous), she included it in a first person plural address. She described the shop with the hats as "full of merchandise from exotic locales, wonderful things made by people who believe, as I do not, as *we* do not, in magic" (2, italics in original). Her use of "we" was one of the many places where the Homebody revealed that she and her fictional audience shared many beliefs, and all these beliefs seem to differentiate her audience from those that might come from "exotic locales." Because of these shared assumptions and the intimate nature of her story, she seemed close to her fictional audience. But she was, nevertheless, dominated by it.

In this dissertation's introduction, Foucault was cited writing about Catholic confession: "the agency of domination does not reside in the one who speaks (for it is he

who is constrained), but in the one who listens and says nothing" (84).[12] This citation was used to help explain the situation of an audience in a theatre, and it is similar to the Homebody's situation. Just as she wanted the silent shopkeeper to guide and dominate her, she allowed her audience's silence to guide and dominate her discourse. Though she did all the talking, she told her audience, "You need say nothing, you would only weaken your position… by speaking" (15). She asked her audience not to respond so she could remain dominated. She continually apologized. She talked about how difficult it must be to listen to her. She wanted to be dominated and to lose the responsibility of privilege. She wanted to identify with those marked by lack of privilege, to "*[join]* the drowning" (Kushner *Homebody* 17, italics in original). But at the same time, through what she says makes a good party, we can see she also wanted to become "surprising to [herself] and return home feeling… less certain of" her assumptions (Kushner *Homebody* 6). She wanted to surprise herself, to be liberated from herself and her own unmarked oppression.

Even her elliptic and ungrammatical language attempted to break beyond the bounds inscribed on her by her gender and class. That language was not really hers. It was Tony Kushner's, and the Homebody's fantasies were also his creation, but they were grounded in fantasies of people in the non-fictional world. The Homebody's

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[12] My translation from the French: "l'instance de domination n'est pas du côté de celui qui parle (car c'est lui qui est contraint) mais du côté de celui qui écoute et se tait."

monologue includes long passages of her reading from an outdated guidebook, and several of these passages are taken directly from Nancy Hatch Wolf's 1965 *An Historical Guide to Kabul*. Now named Nancy Hatch Dupree, in 1965 she was married to a British diplomat and living in Kabul. The cover has the word "Kabul" written in exotic calligraphy. It pictures lounging, turbaned men and a walled city on a hill. It is a sweeping panorama worthy of a motion picture epic. The book opens to exquisite Arabic calligraphy of a seventeenth-century poem about Kabul by the Persian poet Sa'ib-I-Tabrizi. Right away, before reading a word of the text, the cover and Arabic calligraphy suggest to a Western audience a beautiful, leisurely, and exotic place.

The text is in two parts, each which imagines Kabul as city from a romanticized nineteenth century view of British colonialism. The first part is a history of Kabul full of ancient kings, jewels, gardens, battles, and nobility. Its climax is the daring-do of the British colonizers and the dénouement is the newly independent Afghan monarchy in 1964. The history, with its formal tone and quotations from British nobility and historians, definitely assumes a Western audience. The second part of the guidebook is a series of walking tours complete with maps. One can easily see a stylistic similarity between the maps in the guide and another piece of British cartography: Allan Quatermain's fictional map from *King Solomon's Mines*. They are both simple affairs with sketched-in illustrations. They are not identical, but there is a stylistic similarity, and the guide to Kabul contains a treasure hunt of its own. In the introduction it is

revealed that "there is also a large detailed map of the city" somewhere in the book (Wolf xii). A hasty flipping of pages reveals a pull-out, similarly exotic map of the city, one which, like a treasure map, is quite frail after sitting on a shelf for over thirty years.

Maybe the tone of the text and the similarity between the maps and the one in *King Solomon's Mines* is not enough to suggest that the guidebook represents a British colonial fantasy. The case is made stronger, though, when one considers the description of the guidebook in a *New York Times* article from January 17, 2002: "It is perhaps the most extraordinary guide I have ever read... After no more than twenty-four years this has become a guide to a country that no longer exists, like the Austro-Hungarian Empire or British India" (Judah 10). The direct comparison of the guidebook's version of Kabul to "British India" shows how it contains tropes from an era of romanticized British colonization.

These tropes are continued in the descriptions of Dupree's life that appeared in the popular press immediately after the World Trade Center attacks. A Google search of "Nancy Hatch Dupree" in January of 2002 returned 274 hits. That was significantly less than Hamid Karzai, the newly appointed president of Afghanistan returned, but still more than one might suspect for a British woman in her seventies living in the Khyber Pass. A sample of the titles on Dupree reveals items like, "Ghost of a Gracious City Haunts Kabul," from *USA Today* (Squitieri D.01) and "Living Under Taliban: An American's Unlikely Home" from the *Sydney Morning Herald* ("Living Under Taliban"

B.1). Her life story, as represented in the popular press, is one in which she went to Kabul as a diplomat's wife, published the guide to Kabul in 1965, married an anthropologist she met in Afghanistan, and then explored the country with him until the Soviets forced them to leave. This mirrors popular stories like *Out of Africa* where a colonial lady moves to a foreign land, falls in love with a white man (never a "native"), and then, because of outside forces, is forced to leave. It is not the real life of the person Nancy Hatch Dupree who seems to fit this stereotype, but the popular press's representations of her. Mrs. Dupree actually seems to be a very informed friend of the Afghan people. She returned to Afghanistan in 1989 and remained there, even after the US began bombing in 2001. She spoke out in 2001 and 2002 against journalists' simplifications of the U.S. attacks in Afghanistan and fought to save Afghan art and culture. It is the popular press's representation of her that makes her out to be the embodiment of what McClintock calls the commercialization of "an era when European women in brisk white shirts and safari green supposedly found freedom in empire" (15).

The New York Theatre Workshop production of *Homebody/Kabul* captured this tone not just in words but also in images. Compare the Homebody's seat at her table to the representation of Karen Blixen at her desk in the film *Out of Africa*. There is an aesthetic similarity with the use of polished wood furniture, bound books, and even similar hair-styles and dress. I am not suggesting that *Homebody/Kabul* consciously

mimicked *Out of Africa*. Instead, I am suggesting that it tied into these existing tropes in order to represent a privileged but oppressed woman dreaming of finding power and happiness in an exotic land. Just as Meryl Streep playing Karen Blixen in *Out of Africa* kept a real and fictional audience entertained with her stories, the Homebody entertained her real and (unseen) fictional audience with her stories. Meryl Streep's film version of Karen Blixen described the character as a "mental traveler"(*Out of Africa*). Compare that to the Homebody saying, "My borders have only ever been broached by books… except once, briefly" (4). In the first act, she too has only traveled in her mind, except for her one interaction with the hat seller. Even then, her borders were only broached in her mind; surely the hat seller would be quite surprised to discover that he had "broached" her "borders." Just as Chandra Talpade Mohanty argues that "the relationships of women of color to white men are usually mediated by state institutions" (11), one can argue that the relationships of white women to men of color are likewise usually mediated by commerce. The Homebody's *Out of Africa* fantasy is mediated and made possible by her credit card, and, until the second act, this business transaction is the only way she feels she can connect to a man of color.

The next two acts suggest an answer to the Homebody's implicitly and elegantly posed questions and contradictions. Janelle Reinelt suggests that a play is "epic" in the Brechtian sense "*if* the spectators engage the problems and understand the constraints operating on the nation and on themselves as social subjects… [and] *if* some sense of

what might be done next is suggested but not spelled out" (236). With the "accidental transgressions from the reality of life," the spectators of the opening monologue of *Homebody/Kabul* are forced to "engage" the problems not only of the play, but also current events. The next two acts "suggest" but do not "spell out" a solution to these problems. Acts two and three suggest a more complicated version of Afghanistan and world politics by attempting to understand people from Afghanistan on their own terms rather than as fetishized objects. It may be precisely because these acts do not conform to the standard portrayals of colonized subjects that some critics claim that "the play disappears" after the first act (Brantley "Homebody/Kabul Review").

"Yes but I've not *met* them, I've *met* her."

The second act began as a man in a turban entered the Homebody's space, complete with chair and table, and described her gruesome death.[13] As he did so, the table and chairs were removed by stage-hands and the black proscenium curtain parted to reveal the set that would remain for the next two acts. On stage were the remains of several grey, crumbling brick walls, and two plain, boxy hotel beds and nightstands. The bricks of the set blended into the bricks of the theatre auditorium's walls and established the illusion that the set continued out onto either side of the audience,

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[13] While the New York Theatre Workshop production had the first act end with the Homebody's monologue, subsequent drafts of *Homebody/Kabul* include the first scene in Kabul before the first intermission.

neatly continuing the Brechtian effect of blurring the reality of life within the reality of fiction by using the theatre itself to contribute to the set on stage. Now in Kabul, the play continued to have accidental transgressions from the "reality of life," but the second act built on the first act's Western perspective until it culminated in a brilliant, passionate accusation and plea from the point of view of an Afghan woman.

The Afghan doctor explained to a white man in a suit (whom we discover is the Homebody's husband, Milton) how the Homebody was literally ripped apart and beaten to death by Afghan men on the streets of Kabul. There was also a white NGO employee "gone native" named Quango, an Afghan Mullah, and a shadow of a woman projected on a sheet hung between two pieces of the destroyed brick wall. After being exposed to the horrific litany describing the Homebody's death, the two Afghan men left and Priscilla, the Homebody's daughter, came out from behind the sheet. In the next few scenes, she went in search of her mother's missing body, and Quango told Milton about life in Kabul. He talked about the public amputations, refugee camps, infant mortality rate, malnourished population, land-mines, and lack of infrastructure (Kushner *Homebody* 42-43); all are facts also revealed by the news media to the American public in the fall of 2001. This familiarity, rather than "making strange," sounded too much like NPR to be all that terrible. Quango built up to the final line of the scene: "Afghanistan blew my mind, Milton, to bits, and now I cannot get it back. It's like a disease, this place" (46). The disease metaphor is important to Kushner's eventual

"solution" which, keeping in line with Reinelt's perspective on "epic theatre," is "not spelled out" (236).

Early in the second act, Priscilla entered saying she just came from a ruined hospital with her guide, Khwaja, whom she hired in a previous scene. She was standing on one side of the stage, and he on the other, as far apart as possible. She spoke her own litany of the horrors she saw so far in search of her mother's body, of injured children, of operating without anesthesia, and of wounds from landmines (47). She stood as far from Khwaja as possible during this scene, and appeared like a Western spectator trying to stay far from these sights. The scenes Priscilla described were not visible to us, the spectators, they were just another report, like the nightly news. We were in the same position she was: standing as far away from her guide to Afghanistan as possible. Then came one of the first lines in the second act that brought the audience into "real time." Priscilla said, "And [Afghanistan's] not fixable. Surely you know that. No one will ever provide the funds. No one with cash will ever feel responsible" (48). That statement reminded me (and presumably other spectators) that, as I sat there, people were trying to "fix" Afghanistan. But even as I became aware of the world outside the theatre, I was still as far away from Afghanistan in my comfy $60 seat as Priscilla was standing from her Afghan guide. And how optimistic could anyone have felt that the current administration of the U.S. government, or anyone else "with cash," would feel "responsible" for Afghanistan? This question was even more complicated when one

remembered the Homebody's thoughts on culpability: "Our own individual degrees of culpability being entirely bound up in our correspondent degrees of action, malevolent or not, well-intended or otherwise; or in our correspondent degrees of inertia" (14). How responsible should the U.S. government—or anyone else "with cash," including audience members—feel?

An answer to that question was suggested by the Afghan character Mahala in one of the final scenes of Act II. Priscilla's search for her mother's body took many twists and turns, including discovering that her mother might still be alive and newly married to an Afghan man whose current wife (Mahala) needed Priscilla's help getting to England. This story sounded absurd to Priscilla, but, eventually, in her desperation, Priscilla went to meet Mahala. The resulting scene was one of the most complicated of the play.

Mahala spoke in French and Pashtun as well as English, and Khwaja, Priscilla's guide, was supposedly translating. However, Mahala's lines overlapped with Khwaja's, some did not get translated, some he refused to translate, and, mirroring the Homebody's opening monologue, Mahala's speech was fast, steady and spoken with an insistent rhythm: languages, gestures, and emotions were sharply juxtaposed and seemed to overlap in Mahala's desperation to be understood. Mahala and Priscilla sat across from each other in carved wooden chairs with ornate upholstery, each with an Afghan man sitting at her feet supposedly acting as translator. The women's position on

stage facing one another put them in opposition as Mahala tried to convince Priscilla to help her escape Afghanistan. Though Mahala did most of the talking, Priscilla was the one who had to be convinced, who listened and judged, and because of this, she was the one with all the power.

The audience was in a similar position as Priscilla; we had to listen to Mahala's tumultuous language, half understanding, getting half her Pashtun and French words translated, trying to justify our position of power over this woman who had to plead and confess and convince. Like the first act when the Homebody said that the audience should say nothing because speaking would only weaken our position, the silence of the listener was shown to be powerful.

Mahala was furious, and some of her anger was directed at the U.S. in statements that seemed to refer to the 2001 World Trade Center attacks. But her anger was not directed towards the September 2001 events that had not yet occurred in the play's fictional time of 1998. Her attacks were rooted in the 1998 setting: "America buys this, bombs, from Communist Chinese to sell in secret to Taliban through Pakistan. Afghanistan kill the Soviet Union for you, we win the 'Cold War' for you, for us is not so cold, huh?" (84). This was only the beginning of her attacks on America. We sat in our seats, crossing our arms like Priscilla. The real bodies on stage suggested a white woman in the home of an Afghan woman having to hold up against the East's accusations. The fictional space marked Priscilla's body as alien and unfamiliar; she was

the "foreigner" in the scene. Like the hats in the Homebody's monologues, the familiar West was "made strange," and the relationships between nations were no longer dulled by our habitual thinking. With the audience in this open state of mind, Mahala's words became more and more upset (and upsetting); the translation lagged more and more behind while Priscilla tried to protest that she was not American, when suddenly Mahala yelled at her, "You love the Taliban so much, bring them to New York! Well, don't worry, they're coming to New York!" (85).

This was the most chilling line all evening. Undoubtedly, much of the credit must go to Rita Wolf who played Mahala with ferocious passion, but that line, delivered so fervently, made the audience aware of two worlds at once: the fictional world of an Afghan woman's rage and the audience's world of still tender wounds in New York City.

While we were in this state, Mahala raged against the West (the audience) for the familiar widows and orphaned children, but more importantly she shouts that, "[The Taliban] have close library! Library! This is Islam? Muslims are les gens du Livre. Scholars! Poets!" (86). This is not the expected NPR catalog of grievances; instead, Mahala, representing Afghanistan, mourned her livelihood, her schools, and literally her mind: "I go mad, British, I cannot cease shouting all day, a bird, a bird taps the window, I shout at these bird, '*Die, break your neck at the glass!*' I am so bitter of… Of…

De L'Ame? L'esprit?" (87). She has lost her soul. Her dignity, her friends, her social life, and her freedom were also lost:

> Ziala Daizangi, she I have known thirty forty years? Hazarra family from Bamiyan, the family of she now in Qetta, refugee camps. This one dies, that one starve, that one exploded, shot, rape, rape, die, die, die, die, die, whole family, whole family of she, all Daizangis of she, husband of she, children, she throw herself off roof! Taliban not to permit burial and I cannot go to see the body of my friend, my family afraid, no mahram will come and her body, what did he do? Her uncle? There are dogs in the street? Ziala body have been left in the street for dogs? In my dreams, always, she does not come to me, her body is in the street, as it fell. I miss… I miss… (88)

Mahala was looking at Priscilla, across from her, crying, pleading for what she has lost. This was not the stereotypical image of the Middle East, and the reality of Mahala's situation was in macabre contrast to the Homebody's fantasy tour of Kabul. The audience sat in silence, like Priscilla, which for me was a shocked silence. Mahala's description of her city was not the fetishized Kabul we encountered in the first act. The audience, like the actors, was inhabiting a strange space between real life and fiction. I was able to feel sorrow and confusion safely because I was not exactly feeling guilty for the real life tragedies in the U.S. and Afghanistan—the play was not exactly speaking about them—but I could empathize with the shame Priscilla portrayed while trying justify her privileged existence to Mahala. Sally Munt wrote that shame "can… be a transformative experience," that "at the moment one is cast out, one enters a new space of definition and individuation" (122). Like alienation and Kirshenblatt-Gimblett's

"museum effect" that the Afghan hats created for the Homebody in Act I, feeling shame places one outside one's familiar space. While I (and the other spectators) may not have been responsible for the World Trade Center attacks or the situation in Afghanistan, empathizing with Priscilla across from Mahala allowed the audience to feel a shame based on the fictional accusations. Because the fictional accusations accidentally referred to contemporaneous events, the accusations and feeling of shame were not entirely contained in the fiction of the play. The accusations and shame also felt as though they related to the world outside the play, and they allowed me (and I suspect others) to grapple with emotions about the recent World Trade Center attacks along with the U.S. military actions in Afghanistan.

There was a little pause after Mahala finished her monologue, and the Afghan man who was escorting Mahala said, "Usually she is cheerier" (89). In this strange moment, the humor further distanced the audience back to the world of fiction, but perhaps also from the non-fictional suffering in Afghanistan. Laughing relieved the tension the audience was feeling. As the audience was laughing, however, Rita Wolf, playing Mahala, fell to her knees and crawled across the floor. Because the humor gave the spectators a brief respite, we were ready to return to the reality of the play, and it was almost unbearable to watch the desperation of the very real, very human body on the stage as she crawled across the floor literally begging Priscilla for help. This embodiment made it possible for the audience to know a personified representation of

the horror and pain we heard about on the news every night. Jim Nicola was struck by how much he "understood of the circumstances in Afghanistan from news, from television, from radio, from magazines, from journalism, and how much [he] understood from the play, which is a different thing. And how they actually compliment each other, but… are pretty indispensable, both of these things" (Nicola). Seeing Rita Wolf's human body crawling across the floor, begging, was different than anything journalism could show. The violence of this image was incredibly shocking; Mahala grabbed Priscilla's hand so hard that Priscilla could not pull away. "Yesterday I could not remember the alphabet," Mahala said, still on the floor kneeling. "I must be saved by you" (89).

We must remember that Kushner was not placing these sights before us "to be generative of guilt" (Kushner *Homebody* 14). This pitiful plea to be saved did not imply guilt, but begged for responsibility, and because the audience was in a state between fictional and real worlds, we were grabbed by the play as hard as Priscilla was grabbed by Mahala. Being aware of both the fiction and reality of the situation, we empathized with the fictional characters but also imagined being pleaded with by the Afghan women we knew Mahala represented. In that state of mind, we were asked by Mahala's accusations and pleas to face our responsibility.

There are two senses to the word "responsible." There is the sense that is similar to guilt, as in, "responsible for the tragedy." But there is also the sense of behaving well,

as in, "It was a responsible action." To continue the disease metaphor that Quango began, the West was not responsible for smallpox, but it acted responsibly when it led the effort to eradicate the disease. Mahala's plea was for Priscilla to act responsibly in the second sense, but because the audience was both in and outside the fictional world, we also heard it as a real and embodied (if symbolic) request for the West to behave responsibly in our current and future actions.

In the next scene, the final scene of the second act, Priscilla was shaken and her hand was bruised from Mahala holding it so hard. Her guide said that Mahala was "simply one of millions, many many millions," and we knew that. We heard the news on NPR, watched CNN, MSNBC, and other news channels, and we knew the numbers, the statistics, the horrors. We knew Mahala was one of millions of Afghan women in difficult situations, and Priscilla responded, "Yes but I've not *met* them, I've *met* her" (90). Now, because of the embodied presence of the actors, because of the state of mind that the accidental references to current events created, we "met" Mahala. In this moment, the lights faded to black and there was a second intermission.

"In the garden outside, I have planted all my dead."

After the second intermission, the final act of the play began with a version of the liberal Western point of view; Quango said that it seemed "so simple when I arrived [in Afghanistan], Man A wants X, and why Man B denies him, and I shall help them both" (95). But this simplistic point of view was already complicated by what the previous

two acts portrayed: the seemingly intractable situation in Afghanistan. It was doubly complicated by the fact that Quango was shooting up heroin as he said the lines. He finished by saying, "'T'isn't… simple, you'd have to be God" (95). Quango was in Milton's hotel room (which Milton refused to leave), and Milton already smoked some heroin and was rolling around on the floor with stars in his eyes. The shooting up that the actor playing Quango performed was quite intricate and realistic. Seeing this white body from the West shooting up the substance that was a supposedly hated crop of "third world" countries (especially Afghanistan) reminded the audience of the West's complicity and complicated relationship to the difficult circumstances all over the globe, and specifically with Afghanistan with its production of poppies and heroin and the Taliban's genuine and effective effort to curtail this drug production. This was also the scene that more conservative newspapers like the *Wall Street Journal* found so objectionable. Because their reviews show a loyalty to the emerging "war on terror" ideology that suggested the U.S. was a "blameless" victim of terrorist attacks originating in Afghanistan, it was no wonder that a scene that embodied a complicated relationship between Afghanistan, drugs, commerce and the West was difficult for some to accept. This complicated intertwining of the West and Middle East was juxtaposed with an accidental description of the U.S.'s actions during the play's production in New York:

> Milton: Until last week when America bombed [the Taliban]! (*He laughs.*)
> It's down the rabbit hole!
> Quango: Killed quite a number of people actually. Ten, twenty-eight, forty-eight, a hundred and eight depending on the source.
> Milton: Osama bin Laden!
> Quango: No, they missed him. (100)

The audience understands that this exchange was actually about President Clinton's bombing of "terrorist training camps" in 1998, but it could have been about, and made the audience think of, the contemporaneous moment when the U.S. continued to bomb Afghanistan while Osama bin Laden was "down the rabbit hole," impervious to U.S.-incited destruction. Quango then sang a geopolitical song that was about the events of 1998, but the spectators could hear in it an argument that bombing Afghanistan in 2001-02 was not solely a retaliation for a terrorist attack:

> From Khazakstan and Uzbekistan, from Turkmenistan through Afghanistan, oil flowing to Pakistan, and never through Iran, nor Moscow nor New Delhi, golden energy from the Caucasus to the sea, to Western free democracy, past ghostly Pashtunistan alive only in the heart's plan of every Taliban man and each Pathan… (102)

Showing the oil and money trails through Asia and the Middle East demonstrated the intricate connections between Eastern and Western politics and economies in a similar manner as showing two privileged, Western white men taking Afghan heroin. The play also suggested one reason why these geopolitical complications might not be found in popular journalism: Milton passed out in a drug-induced sleep, pants off, shirt unbuttoned, almost choking to death on his own saliva, during the geopolitical song. This disgusting act on stage embodied the West "succumbing to luxury" and not

wanting to hear what was happening elsewhere in the world. Quango's response to Milton's snores summed it up: "Ah, Milton? You do not care for the geopolitical?" (102).

Later in the act, after sleeping with Quango in order to get papers to transport Mahala from Afghanistan to London, Priscilla found herself bathed in blue light at the grave of Cain. This scene has gone through drastic revisions between the New York Theatre Workshop production and subsequent productions, but in the New York Theatre Workshop version Priscilla met a Sufi hermit who was the custodian of the grave. On the grave of Cain was a simple candle casting shadows of the hermit along the broken brick walls. There was the sound of chirping crickets and it seemed as though there were hints of stars in the dark blue "sky." Before Priscilla could approach the grave, she first had to strip naked and wash herself for she was not "clean" (114). Before she undressed, she said she was "embarrassed. Ashamed" because of her recent mercenary sex, and at that moment, Quango entered with Mahala's visa papers. Quango said it is nights like these that he knows he will "never get clean" (114). After he left and Priscilla stripped and washed herself, she said she has learned things in her travels, and when she touched the grave of Cain she discovered it was bleeding. This miraculous discovery convinced her to pray, and she talked about her relationship with her mother: "I begged for definitions, 'what's it mean, mummy, what's it mean?' Maybe she's answered the begging, finally, she's given me… Responsibility. For a life" (118). The feeling of begging an authority figure for meaning resonated with many people's

relationship to the news media after the World Trade Center attacks, and this play suggested responsibility as a response, rather than guilt or vindictive self-righteousness.

Following the World Trade Center attacks, many people sat in front of the television asking, "What does it mean, what does it mean?" There were countless stories on television and in newspapers about "why *they* hate us," but the media treated its audience like the drooling, drugged Milton, by assuming any analysis of the geopolitical would put us to sleep. News stories, at best, were similar to Quango's original assumption about why "Man A wants X, and why Man B denies him, and I shall help them both" (95), at worst it was simplistic rhetoric about some undefined "they" hating "our freedom." But in *Homebody/Kabul* the audience found itself watching a play that asked the same question about the relationship between privileged Western society and the destroyed country of Afghanistan: "What does it all mean?" The authority figure the play presented here was a Sufi hermit, a religious man from a non Judeo-Christian tradition, properly ascetic, and bathed in a deep blue light. While Priscilla suggested that her mother finally gave her the answer to her questions, which was a "Responsibility. For [Mahala's] life," Priscilla still did not find this answer entirely satisfying and continued to question the hermit:

> Priscilla: It's the worst place on earth. Someone is to blame.
> The Marabout: (*shrugs, then:*) I shelter when it rains under a collapsed wall. I do not ask who knocked the wall over. I ask only that it does not collapse further. (119)

This parable was the most explicit answer the play gave to the question of how to act responsibly in Afghanistan, and interestingly it was dropped for subsequent drafts of the play. This parable suggested that to the people living in the rubble, it may matter more to keep the country running than to assign blame for its destruction. This returns to the two senses of the word "responsible." The Marabout did not want to know who was responsible for knocking the wall over in the first place, he only asked that people act responsibly to not knock it over further. In this way, Priscilla was not accepting blame for Mahala's life, but she was accepting responsibility by trying to save it.

In the scene after her interaction with the Sufi hermit, Priscilla took leave of her guide, Khwaja. She said, "We've brought our misery to your city, my family. I'm sorry. For the trouble" (121). When she apologized for her "family," it was nearly the opposite of the scene in the second act when she emerged from the hospital and said no one with cash would ever feel responsible. In this final scene between them, she was standing close to Khwaja and called him "uncle" (122). The audience was again positioned with her. The audience traveled with her through this fictional world, and now we felt safely in place with her standing near Khwaja. Khwaja's reply to Priscilla's apology was, "What have you ever brought us besides misery? The West? And many among us would like to give your misery back to you" (121). Khwaja's anger and feeling when he said that there are many who "would like to give your misery back to you" had a similar but less dramatic effect to hearing Mahala say the Taliban will be coming to

New York. And as the audience returned to that conscious awareness of the play's time and reality's time, Khwaja finished his line: "You have before you the spectacle of our suffering. Make of it what you will" (121). This open-ended comment, combined with Priscilla's newfound responsibility which was separate and different from guilt suggested but did not provide a specific answer to the questions brought up in the Homebody's monologue about how to accept privilege without "succumbing to luxury." The fact that it was a suggested answer rather than anything explicit continues the Brechtian "epic" nature of the play (according to Reinelt's definition). Priscilla's stammering reply that she was trying to help by taking Mahala back to England elicited a change of tone from Khwaja: "It is not nothing. And it was polite to apologize, niece. I accept" (121). This apology and acceptance may exist only in the "reality of fiction," but because Khwaja's line about giving the misery back to us brought the audience back into "real world" time, there was a strange way that the apology and acceptance also existed in the "reality of life," the public ritual in which the audience is engaged. Even if no one in Afghanistan heard it, all of the members of the audience that sympathized with Priscilla and wanted to apologize and behave responsibly were witness to it, and the art brought this state of mind into the world of objects (Geertz 99).

Priscilla remained pessimistic at the end of her scene with Khwaja, saying, "I believe this place is doomed, Khwaja Aziz. Uncle, I don't think there's enough good will in the world to lift it" (122). But her pessimism was potentially contradicted in the

following scene between Milton and Mahala. In fact, the scene between them was quite reminiscent of the proceeding scene between Priscilla and Khwaja. It began with Milton and Mahala waiting to leave Afghanistan while Priscilla was being questioned about some "poetry" (possibly information in code for the Afghan group the Northern Alliance that opposed the Taliban) that Khwaja gave her. As Milton and Mahala sat on a bench on one side of the stage, stealing nervous glances at a young Taliban soldier with a large machine gun, Milton said, "Your daughters, I guess they don't do that, disobey?" and Mahala replied, "My daughters, all Afghan daughters, are slaves now. Beaten killed" (130). Milton saw that he was thoughtless, then added, "I'm… sorry about all that" (131). This apology was another symbolic apology from the West to Afghanistan. Mahala replied, "Tosh. You care nothing all that, Afghan daughter. (*Leaning in, an odd small smile*:) Listen, British Sahib, it is… *OK. My problem*" (131). Mahala was not blaming; she was taking responsibility. She was not taking on guilt or blaming herself, but she is acknowledging that it was, regardless of who was to blame, "[her] problem." Milton stammered a little, seeming ashamed and confused, and a new recognition of Mahala's difficult position appeared in him because of that shame and confusion, much like shame potentially allowed spectators to see Mahala differently after her monologue near the end of the second act.

Mahala and Milton were positioned spatially and dramaturgically against the guard of whom they were afraid. To help calm that fear, they talked about the

similarities between the Dewey decimal system and the computer networking that Milton did at his work. As they talked, they made a connection. Milton then told her that his company was putting library catalogs online, and when Mahala learned that there were "millions of books" available (133), she began to cry. Milton saw that she was crying and again apologized, to which Mahala replied, "Poor Afghanistan" (133). His apologies may have been less informed than Priscilla's, but through his shame and their mutual fear, he *met* this woman. He met this one woman of many million, and when the Mullah entered ominously with Priscilla, Mahala said to Milton, "Please take me to London" (133). We again saw an embodied plea, but this time to a white man "with cash" that Priscilla assumed would never feel responsible.

The Mullah was furious because he believed that some poetry written in Esperanto given by Khwaja to Priscilla for transport to London is coded messages for the Northern Alliance. He may have been correct. Either way, he killed Khwaja and he will kill Mahala if she does not cooperate. After much yelling in Pashtun that left Mahala sobbing, the guard threw Mahala to the ground, cocked his gun and held it to her head. The scene was a violent, terrifying, immediate representation of a potential execution, but Milton, shaking, not wanting to get near the gun, said:

> I have over two thousand pounds. Please do not kill her. I will give you all the money I have. Let us go. We don't have your papers. My daughter knows nothing of any of this, this is your problem entirely, not ours. Here. (*He takes out his wallet and proffers it*.) *Here*. Take. Please do not shoot this woman. (139)

Milton was not accepting guilt for the situation; he said that his daughter (and, by extension, he) "knows nothing of any of this" and that it was the mullah's "problem entirely." But he nevertheless assumed responsibility, and was willing to give up all the money he had with him to keep them from shooting Mahala. The mullah said that it is a crime to bribe an official, and the scene continued:

> Milton: You, you take bribes. I've been told, you people take bribes. This is a bribe. I've been told you're not so pure. This is a bribe. Take it, please. I don't mean to insult you, sir, but you can't shoot her.
> Mullah Aftar Ali Durranni: You want her?
> Milton: I don't want to watch her die.
> Mullah Aftar Ali Durranni: We shall shoot her in the other room.
> Milton: Please. Take. (140-41)

The Mullah did not take the bribe, but he did not shoot Mahala either. Milton took responsibility for and saved an Afghan woman. It was not that he wanted to—he specifically said he did not want her—it was that he does not "want to watch her die." This was the model the play suggested. Not guilt, but responsibility, meaning not a desire to give up Western "luxury" to which we "succumb" (17), but a stronger desire to not *see* Afghanistan die. The play, by presenting us with bodies on stage, allowed us to meet people who live in poverty (and often face early death) because of the luxury of our lives. It positioned us, in the end, to either accept responsibility for a (fictional but representative) life, or to allow someone we met to die. But not everyone in the audience wanted to accept responsibility. While leaving the theatre and emerging onto the prosperous streets of the East Village, I overheard a conversation between three

middle-aged white women in expensive coats who were also leaving the theatre. “It makes me wonder who will rebuild Afghanistan, “ the first asked. Her companion responded, “I hope to God it’s not us.”

The final scene of the play took place in the Homebody’s room, but this time Mahala sat in the Homebody’s chair. Just as Priscilla was made “exotic” to a Western audience when she was in Mahala’s surroundings, Mahala was made “familiar” in the Western setting. Priscilla entered in a raincoat from the London streets as the sound of a soft drizzle fell around us. We did not know whether the Homebody was dead or alive or even possibly married to Mahala’s ex-husband, and, when asked, Mahala would not tell Priscilla. In the course of the conversation, Priscilla said the Northern Alliance “sound as dreadful, really, as the Taliban” (145). This line was one of the final ones that brought me out of the play’s time and into the “reality of life.” As the line made me aware of the world outside the fiction of the play, Mahala summed up the hope we shared in our public ritual: “We hope not so. Better for women, not as God-crazy. Not agents of Pakistan. On the other hand, Massoud, Rabbani are Tajiks, not Pashtun, so will the Afghans follow them? … In Afghanistan, the choices are frequently narrow” (145-46). But Mahala was no longer in Afghanistan, and she had more choices than when she lived under the Taliban. Because of the personal responsibility Priscilla and Milton took for her, she was allowed to flee that land, even though she described her exile as very difficult. She said, in the final line of the play, that “in the garden outside, I

have planted all my dead" (147). Where was this fictional garden? Because it only existed offstage, it only existed in the strange place fiction creates in our minds.

This space, not exactly true, but not a lie either, represented the perspective the play gave the audience. The accidental references to contemporaneous events allowed spectators to be conscious of fictional and nonfictional time simultaneously, and this last reference to the dead allowed us to place in the same fictional garden the people who died so near where we were sitting as well as those dead and dying in far-away Afghanistan. We were able to perform our mourning in this theatre, and this public ritual of mourning replaced the solitary mourning many of us were going through. We performed an act of mourning alongside both the actors and characters onstage. Was symbolic apology, public mourning, and the attempt to let go of guilt while accepting responsibility by people who paid $60 each to be in a comfortable Western neither-here-nor-there space too small a gesture to be anything useful? Maybe. We have already seen how the reviews in the press were not able to effectively challenge the dominant ideology that the United States was not in any sense "responsible" for the Taliban or the plight of the Afghan people. But, in the words of Khwaja, "It is not nothing" (121), and alienation allowed several hundred spectators to come together with the actors each night and experience a place of public mourning. It was also a place where spectators could feel unified in their emergent ideology that dissented from the Bush Administration's policies. However, this was not the limit of the production's political

potential. The number of reviews that supported this emergent ideology (even if the production did not, or did not intend to) also helped show the community of readers that held a dissenting emergent ideology that they were not alone.

There is also an important methodological conclusion that can be drawn from this chapter. While analyzing the reviews of the production and comparing them to my own reaction, I found that my response fit neatly into the reviews that shared my emergent ideology of dissent whether I read them before seeing the production or not. This makes me suspect that reviews are not only representative of a single reviewer's ideology or even of the ideology of the periodical in which it appears. Based on my experience with *Homebody/Kabul* and its reviews, I believe reviews are representative of the reaction of a group of spectators who share that reviewer's ideology. This is important because, while Knowles suggests that materialist semiotics can only be applied to productions one has seen and that he "does not attempt to create a theoretical template that can be applied to performance analysis in any context" (22), I believe that by utilizing Carey's insights about the media and paying particularly close attention to reviews, one can substitute reviews for actually seeing the performance. After all, the data one collects while personally viewing a performance is only one piece of information to be used in materialist semiotics. While I admit that the more data one has the better, I found that my personal reaction to *Homebody/Kabul* was not essential to

analyze the production's ideological work. It was helpful, but the analysis of the reviews was far more important.

Another important conclusion to draw from this chapter is that the production failed to incorporate an emergent ideology into the dominant one because of three main factors: the production text was never meant to support the emergent ideology that ended up being attached to it, the production did not give spectators tools to become activists outside the theatre, and its geographical location hindered its ability to seem like it was part of the dominant ideology. While I agree with Nicola that it was "impossible" to see this play in late 2001 and early 2002 as anything except a commentary on the World Trade Center attacks and the subsequent war in Afghanistan, the production text was in no way "about" those events. Attending subsequent productions of the play in next couple years at Berkeley Repertory Theatre and Steppenwolf Theatre made this abundantly clear when Mahala's line about the Taliban coming to New York carried almost no emotional resonance (though this was probably also due to the physical distance of those productions from New York). Since the production text was not meant to support an emergent ideology that dissented from the Bush Administration's actions, it is hardly surprising that it failed to adequately do so. It would be much more surprising if it *had* managed to incorporate this dissent into the dominant ideology.

Homebody/Kabul also failed to effectively support the dissenting emergent ideology by not giving the spectators tools to become activists outside the theatre. Though this is intricately related to the fact that the production never intended to create activists of dissent against the Bush Administration, it is nevertheless part of why the off-Broadway production did little ideological work outside of those who saw the play or read about it. In the next chapter, the 1985 Public Theatre production of *The Normal Heart* is offered as a counter-example, a production of intentional activism that supported an emergent ideology by giving the spectators specific tools to fight for that emergent ideology outside the theatre.

The final factor that kept *Homebody/Kabul* from effectively supporting an emergent ideology was its East Village location. Though in a one sense this locale fit the production perfectly since it was billed as an intellectual dissent which matched the neighborhod's history, it also made it easy for reviewers to dismiss the production as outside the mainstream. For instance, Podheretz dismissed Kushner (and, by extension, *Homebody/Kabul*) out of hand by calling him "isolated… in those coffeehouse conversations with the world's oldest living Bolsheviks" (23). A coffee house with a living Bolshevik is much more likely to be found in the Village than in Times Square where Broadway is situated. Though *Homebody/Kabul* was a mainstream production by this study's definition, its geographical location still hindered its ability to be seen as part of the mainstream, dominant ideology. The final case study, *Angels in America*,

received its New York premiere on Broadway and its location helped assure even those reviewers and spectators who disagreed with its emergent ideology that it was firmly placed in the mainstream. Of course, it is impossible to know whether *Homebody/Kabul* would have more effectively supported an emergent ideology on Broadway—it actually seems unlikely given that its main problem was that the production text did not actually support the emergent ideology its spectators ascribed to it. However, a production on Broadway would certainly have been more difficult for Podhoretz and critics like him to dismiss as outside the dominant ideology. Thus, in contrast to scholars who argue that performance outside mainstream theatre space is the only way to support an emergent ideology, this chapter suggests that the more mainstream a production, the more likely that the production could support an emergent ideology by incorporating it into the dominant ideology.

Chapter Three
The Writing on the Wall:
Alienation and Activism in Joseph Papp's 1985 Public Theatre Production of Larry Kramer's *The Normal Heart*

"Except on those Rare Occasions When It Does"

Unlike reviews of *Homebody/Kabul* that found Kushner "prescient," reviewers of the 1985 Public Theatre production of Larry Kramer's *The Normal Heart* could not predict the death toll that would be caused by HIV/AIDS. The reviewers tend to call the play "hysterical" (Rich "Normal Heart" C17). While discussing the "nearly 5,000" total dead from AIDS (Kroll "Going" 87), they do not believe the play's warnings that the disease will only continue to spread if it is not checked by public institutions and activists. Now that 6,000 people die from the disease daily (Gay Men's Health Crisis), 5,000 total deaths seems an unimaginably low number.

Far from inevitable, these deaths from HIV/AIDS were, as many posit, avoidable. Randy Shilts, the foremost chronicler of the AIDS epidemic in the 1980s, reminds us,

> The AIDS epidemic, of course, did not arise full grown from the biological landscape; the problem had been festering throughout the decade. The death tolls of the late 1980s are not startling new developments but an unfolding of events predicted for many years. There had been a time when much of this suffering could have been prevented, but by 1985 that time had passed… The bitter truth was that AIDS did not just happen to America—it was allowed to happen by an array of institutions, all of

> which failed to perform their appropriate tasks to safeguard the public health. The failure of the system leaves a legacy of unnecessary suffering that will haunt the Western world for decades to come. (xxi-xxii)

The failure of institutions like the National Institute for Health (NIH) and the Center for Disease Control (CDC) to "safeguard the public health" is now well-accepted. As one of the characters says in *The Normal Heart*, "There's not a good word to be said for anybody's behavior" (L. Kramer 116). In 2005, no one questions that government institutions, the media, and even most activists failed to safeguard the public from the AIDS epidemic in the 1980s. However, in 1985, Kramer's statement was still controversial; government agencies, the media, and especially the Reagan administration were all unwilling to even admit there was an epidemic, let alone that an epidemic had been raging for over four years. In the end it was not the news media, the President, the Congress, the NIH, or the CDC that brought public attention to AIDS and all the failures in its management. It was a play: *The Normal Heart*.[14] As Tony Kushner writes, "Kramer, not understanding that theater had ceased to be news-worthy, wrote a play that made news, made a difference, had an effect—not to win prizes or encomia in the press, nor to set the box office ablaze, but to catalyze society, which we all know

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[14] While there were other plays that dealt with AIDS before *The Normal Heart*, in particular the play *As Is* which ran at the same time as *The Normal Heart*, none of them took to task government organizations and various responsible parties in the same antagonistic tone as *The Normal Heart*. Because *As Is* makes no attempt at activism and it garnered less reviews, I am excluding it from my case studies even though it is contemporaneous.

theater can't do anymore, except on the rare occasions when it does, as when Larry Kramer wrote *The Normal Heart*" ("Foreword" vii).

In 1981 the CDC declared AIDS an epidemic, but by the fall of 1983, little had been done nationally to halt the spread of the disease, and even less had been done in New York City, one of the prime sites of transmission. President Ronald Reagan had not mentioned the disease in public and would not do so until 1987 when 36,058 U.S. citizens had been already diagnosed with the disease and 20,849 had died from it. The *San Francisco Chronicle,* led by staff reporter Randy Shilts, was the only newspaper to give the disease major and consistent coverage. San Francisco had a "torpid" program for AIDS, but even that was more than the paltry $24,500 that New York City had allotted to fighting the spread of the disease (Shilts 379-380). By the end of 1983, when New York City allocated this small amount of public health spending, over 1,042 people had died of AIDS in the city. Yet these thousand deaths did nothing to convince the city or country to fight.

Instead, it was the Gay Men's Health Crisis (GHMC), a volunteer organization set up by Kramer and his friends, that stood at the forefront of AIDS awareness and worked to serve those citizens neglected by the city government. According to Shilts:

> [GMHC] was running its entire organization out of five small rooms in a boarding house. The group had enlisted 300 clinical volunteers and coordinated twenty training sessions a months [sic] for doctors and nurses seeking information on treating AIDS. They trained 50 new volunteers every month for new clients. Although the GMHC space was woefully

> inadequate, few landlords wanted their buildings to become the site of Manhattan's 'leper central.' Dr. Joseph Sonnabend, one of the city's leading AIDS doctors, filed suit against his co-op association after he was ordered evicted from his offices because of the large number of AIDS patients visiting his West 12th Street address. When GMHC asked the city if it could use an abandoned high school on West 13th Street as an AIDS service center, the city demanded $2 million cash up front. Gays were not about to get charity from the Koch administration. (Shilts 380)

Though Kramer was one of the men who founded the GMHC, his outspoken and militant tactics had caused a violent schism between him and the group. He left the organization, and in the following months traveled to London where he "saw David Hare's *A Map of the World* which excited him with its fusion of theater and politics. When he returned to the United States, he was fired up by the idea of writing a play about his experiences with GMHC and the AIDS crisis" (Papp 257). Indirectly, then, David Hare contributed to one of the most effective pieces of political theatre in the United States; while no one would have predicted *A Map of the World* to lead to a play galvanizing resistance to the AIDS epidemic in New York City, one can say this occurred, or at least that *A Map of the World* was one of the variables that caused it to occur. According to the narratives of those who chronicled the inspiration of *The Normal Heart*, it would not have been written without Kramer seeing *A Map of the World* and thinking that theatre was the correct medium for this particular message. When writing about the politics of theatre, one has to remember that these types of subtle and unforeseen effects exist but frequently go unnoticed or undocumented.

This anecdote is important because it shows why Kramer, who until 1985 wrote only novels and screenplays, chose the medium of theatre. Kramer "has stated repeatedly that formal aesthetic concerns are no great concern of his, that he chooses different media (novel, screenplay, essay, play) depending on which seems most useful at a given juncture to the accomplishment of an explicitly social goal" (Kushner "Foreword" xiii). Kramer felt that theatre could best spread word about HIV/AIDS and move people to action because of its immediacy and its ability to quickly produce a script.

Kramer rented a cottage in Cape Cod, and when he was nearly through with a draft of *The Normal Heart* (at that point titled *City of Death*) he returned to his home in New York City and found five letters waiting for him. Four were from doctors that "despaired that the gay political leadership had not challenged the mayor or health department to do something, anything, about stemming AIDS. The fifth letter was the announcement of a memorial service for a friend who had just died of AIDS. He was the thirty-second friend of Larry's who had succumbed to the syndrome" (Shilts 380). It was in this environment that Kramer finished *The Normal Heart*; he found the title in a W.H. Auden poem which ended, "We must love one another or die" (L. Kramer 5).

After finishing *The Normal Heart* draft in January 1984, Kramer did not seek out "gay theatres" to produce it. Instead, he wanted a more mainstream production. As literary critic Michael Paller explains it, "In relation to the mainstream, [gay theatre]

was marginal and invisible, making up in energy, devotion and ingenuity what it lacked in recognition and money; [Larry Kramer] was an Academy Award nominee—it would have been surprising indeed if Kramer had sought out a gay theatre to produce his first play" (238). Because Kramer had already garnered mainstream success with his Academy Award nomination, he fully expected his writing to be presented in a mainstream setting. This was in keeping with his purpose of trying to publicize his message about the AIDS epidemic. As David Román reminds us, the theatre that Paller calls the "gay theatre" had been performing about AIDS for years before the 1985 premiere of *The Normal Heart* (Román *Acts of Intervention* 64). However, Kramer did not want his statements to be "marginal and invisible" (Paller 238), and to gain the audience and media attention he wanted, Kramer turned to mainstream theatre.

Even if Kramer's status in the art world was "mainstream," his views on gay politics were not. While his agent was reading *The Normal Heart*, Kramer went to Atlanta to determine what, if anything, the head office of the CDC was doing to prevent the transmission of AIDS.

> He was not surprised to see that the Centers for Disease Control seemed as underfunded and overworked as ever. He was taken aback, however, when one prominent staffer in the AIDS Activities Office bluntly asked him, 'Why don't you guys get married?' When Larry started to explain that most states have laws specifically barring same-sex matrimony, the CDC doctor got impatient. 'I don't mean marry men,' he said. 'I mean women. If you guys had been married to women, this never would have happened.' The comment, from one of the CDC's top AIDS people, gave Larry insight into why, nearly three years into the epidemic, the CDC still

> did not include even one openly gay person on their burgeoning staff at the AIDS office. (Shilts 405)

Clearly Kramer's status as a mainstream writer did not translate into mainstream status as a gay man since this CDC doctor openly criticized Kramer's sexual orientation. It is also interesting to note that the doctor blamed the virus on gay men when they did not cause it; rather gay men were a disproportionately victimized population in need of help.

After Kramer returned from his trip to Atlanta he had trouble finding a theatre willing to take a risk on his play; "he turned for help to Emmett Foster, a GMHC volunteer who was an Administrative Assistant to Joseph Papp, the celebrated founder-producer of the New York Shakespeare Festival/Public Theater" (Papp 257). Foster was able to get the script to Gail Merrifield Papp who was the head of the Play Department at the time. She read it and began to have frequent discussions with Kramer as he revised the script based on her questions. She explains, "He liked the methodology of questions because when he tried to explain something to me, things became clearer in his own mind. He loved to rewrite and was very fast and smart at it" (Papp 259).

In the meantime, Joseph Papp was coming to realize that the media's response to AIDS was inadequate, particularly in New York City. Papp had a history of fighting for political causes; he was red-baited during the McCarthy era, which led to him being fired from his job at CBS. After that, he became a public figure during a fight with New York Parks czar Robert Moses over Papp's free productions of Shakespeare in Central

Park and to the New York Shakespeare Festival which he founded in 1954 (Papp 258). On April 30, 1983, GMHC held a benefit at Madison Square Garden; all 17,000 seats sold out in advance. Included in the line-up were such public figures as Leonard Bernstein and Mayor Koch. "The night was shaping up as the biggest gay event of all time… put[ting] $250,000 into the treasury of Gay Men's Health Crisis" (Shilts 282). As extravagant as all this was, the event was not covered in the media; not even the *New York Times* ran a story on the event. Emmett Foster, the GMHC volunteer who was also Papp's administrative assistant told Papp

> 'Something horrible has happened. Last night GMHC had its fundraiser and no one followed up.' [Foster] told him the whole story. Joe said 'This is not right. Something has to be done. When I get back to the office, I'll call the papers and ask them why it wasn't covered.' [Foster] started crying in the car because [he] was so moved that [Papp] had so much power and could use it. Everybody else was like 'What happened?' They didn't know what to do, whereas Joe picked up the phone. (Papp 259)

Months later, in December of 1984, Joseph Papp received a letter from Victoria Hamburg and Terry Beirn. They represented the media committee of the AIDS Medical Foundation, and they asked Papp to "enlist some of the great talent and courage of the theatrical community to help battle this disease [AIDS]" (Hamburg and Beirn). It was about this time that Gail Merrifield Papp gave a draft of *The Normal Heart* to Joseph Papp.

Despite Kramer's impatience and desire to get his script into Joseph Papp's hands as quickly as possible, Foster and Gail Merrifield Papp convinced him to rewrite it first. When Joseph Papp finally read it, he described the experience this way:

> So I pick it up and I read the first twenty pages and I put it down and say 'Gail, I can't get through this play. It's overwritten, it's overblown.' She didn't say a word, so I pick it up again a day or so later and plow my way through the play, and at each point I put it down, I say, 'I can't get any further with this. There's a moment here and there, but some of the stuff is so poor, and so outrageous.' Finally I get through the whole thing and say, 'This is one of the worst things I've ever read'—and I'm crying. I was crying! Could you believe that? I was so moved, because there was so much feeling in the play. The heart of *The Normal Heart* was beating there. (Papp 8)

After that, Joseph Papp and Larry Kramer met and decided to do the play; opening night was set for April 21, 1985, nearly four years after the CDC declared AIDS an epidemic. After Kramer left, Joseph Papp "called Literary Manager Bill Hart into his office. 'Someone has to get control of the structure,' he said confidentially. 'Meet with him. See what you can do'" (Papp 261). Based on those meetings, the script changed substantially; in fact, over two hours of text were cut (Papp 265).

While Kramer was willing to take advice from Gail Merrifield Papp and Hart on his script, he was very difficult to work with during rehearsals. "He didn't trust anyone to do their job professionally and he maneuvered in outrageous ways. If Larry in any way felt attacked, you would be dead" (Papp 263). This led to him being banned from many aspects of production, including many of the rehearsals.

As the production neared opening night, Papp and the Public Theater staff braced themselves for controversy. New York City owned the spaces in which the Public Theater performed: both the building in lower Manhattan and the space in Central Park. Therefore, Mayor Koch was Papp's landlord. Because the play attacked the Mayor and many other New York institutions and national organizations, Papp had the Public's lawyer prepare notes regarding potential libel issues. The notes are broken into five categories:

> 1. New York Times: 13 incidents
> 2. Mayor: 14 times
> 3. Mayor's asst/Hiram Keebler: 5 incidents
> 4. Commissioner of health: 3 incidents
> 5. Affiliations mentioned in dialogue: The Native, Health Dept, Citibank, New York Times, Washington Post, Time, Newsweek, New England Journal of Medicine, Village Voice, Donahue, CBS/Dan Rather, Today Show, NIH, CDC ("Notes Regarding Potential Libel")

Based on the lawyer's report, however, the Public was not in danger of being sued. Nevertheless, Joseph Papp called Mayor Koch and the *New York Times*. Papp relates his call to the Mayor this way:

> I said 'Mister Mayor, I have a play here about AIDS. I'm going to put it on. The playwright criticizes you and the administration. Whether it's true or not, he wrote it. He says it's true. I'm not going to be a censor, and I just wanted to let you know.' He says 'Fine, Joe, thank you for telling me.' Very pleased. (Papp 264)

His call to the *New York Times* editor did not go nearly as smoothly; one of Kramer's major grievances against the *Times* can be seen in a piece of dialogue where a character

compares its coverage of the AIDS epidemic to that of a poisoned Tylenol scare. The character says, "Have you been following the Tylenol scare? In three months there have been seven deaths, and the *Times* has written fifty-four articles. The month of October alone they ran one article every single day. Four of them were on the front page. For us—in seventeen months they've written seven puny articles. And we have a thousand cases!" (L. Kramer 75). After Papp had someone check the accuracy of Kramer's accusations, he called his friend Arthur Gelb at the *New York Times*:

> I said, 'Artie, listen, I'm doing a play here, and it's critical of the *Times*.'
>
> He says, 'What do you mean! We were the first ones to put that thing in the paper! Didn't we have it on June 27th? We had the story on this thing. How can you say that?'
>
> 'No,' I said, 'it was not June 27th. It was August. Mind you, Artie, I didn't write the play. I'm putting on the play because it's an important theme and subject. If you think he's wrong, sue him.' (Papp 264-65)

Two important aspects of Papp's decision to produce this play can be seen in this exchange. First, one can see his bravery and forthrightness; he said, "It's important" and to him its political import made it worth the various risks of production. Second, one can see Papp's good business sense in calling the *Times* and suggesting that, ultimately, the claims made by the play were Kramer's and not the Public's. This limited the Public's liability and allowed continued good relations between his institution and a newspaper that can make or break theatres. Hence this anecdote shows Papp's bravery and pragmatism that he practiced hand in hand while producing *The Normal Heart*. The play opened on April 21, 1985.

A Place in History

Since the opening of *The Normal Heart*, scholarship on the play has mainly concentrated on where it fit into theatrical history rather than asking what the Public Theatre production accomplished. There are several histories of theatre that focus on gay men and theatre that responded to AIDS, such as Harold Clum's *Still Acting Gay: Male Sexuality in Modern Drama* and Nicholas de Jongh's *Not in Front of the Audience: Homosexuality on the Stage*. Each of them features prominent descriptions of *The Normal Heart*. There are also close readings of the play's rhetoric (often alongside close readings of the rhetoric in Kramer's journalism and prose fiction), for example, John Clum's article "Kramer Vs. Kramer, Ben and Alexander: Larry Kramer's Voices and His Audiences" and David Bergman's "Larry Kramer and the Rhetoric of AIDS." A 1992 issue of *Text and Performance Quarterly* is devoted to asking why some theatre is so controversial when performed in the U.S. Midwest, and a college production of *The Normal Heart* at Southwest Missouri State is one of the case studies examined. Finally, there are a few articles that argue for *The Normal Heart*'s aesthetic merits. Though none of this writing directly addresses my question about whether the Public Theatre premiere supported the emergent ideology that HIV/AIDS was a public health disaster that needed attention, they are noted because this previous scholarship influences my close-reading of the performance text.

Two representative articles that concentrate on *The Normal Heart*'s aesthetic

merits are Tony Kushner's foreword to the Grove Press edition of the play and David Willinger's chapter in the anthology *We Must Love One Another or Die,* edited by Lawrence D. Mass. Both compare Kramer's plays to those of Eugene O'Neill and Arthur Miller. Kushner writes that Kramer "has stated repeatedly that formal aesthetic concerns are no great concern of his" because he writes purely for "the accomplishment of an explicitly social goal" ("Foreword" xiii). Nevertheless, writes Kushner, "O'Neill, and later Arthur Miller, are the forebears of a realist, anti-lyrical theater that bravely tosses aside the habiliments of conventional pleasure, seeking ever greater depths" ("Foreword" xii). The lengthy foreword continues this line of comparison with detailed close readings of O'Neill, Miller, and Kramer. By comparing Kramer to these authors of the U.S. dramatic canon, Kushner is implicitly arguing for Kramer's place within that same canon. It is interesting to note that Kushner puts Kramer in conversation with the two straight ancestors of U.S. drama and not with Tenessee Williams, a gay ancestor that is arguably equally important. This rhetorical move seems designed to keep Kramer out of the category "gay" playwright. Similarly, Willinger compares Kramer to O'Neill and Miller, and then writes that "Kramer knows how to write encounters of unbearable, soul-baring intensity. And he succeeds in doing so time and time again in *The Normal Heart*" (233). These formulations about Kramer's writing echo reviews of Kushner's play *Angels in America* that call it "universal" in theme despite its gay characters. Howver, Kushner and Willinger's assessment of the *The Normal Heart*'s

aesthetic merits are quite different from the contemporaneous reviews that describe the play as propaganda with little artistic merit. Each of these authors is writing decades after the play's premiere, and by implicitly arguing for its canonization alongside Miller and O'Neil they suggest an ideology that sees this play as fact because of its fiery indictment of nearly every public institution's failure to stem the AIDS epidemic. While these writings by Willinger and Kushner interpellate their readers into an ideology that accepts those failures as fact, these authors address the published text of *The Normal Heart* and do not focus on any particular production; thus, while my close reading of the text may be influenced by their opinions, my materialist semiotic analysis of the Public Theatre premiere of *The Normal Heart* will not be in direct dialogue with them.

The Normal Heart has been analyzed as an example of controversial theatre. For the 1992 issue of *Text and Performance Quarterly*, two scholars—Joseph Roach and Robert Cox—take a production of *The Normal Heart* at Southwest Missouri State College as a case study. These writings about *The Normal Heart* will be taken into account when thinking about how an audience was involved in re-imagining a community and was re-positioned as a community of memory/speech in New York. Yet both of these articles are specifically about a production in Missouri. Therefore, my own materialist semiotic analysis of the Public Theatre production of *The Normal Heart* is not in direct conversation with them, but will use some of their insights about how the play positions an audience in order to re-imagine who is included in a community.

There are many articles that analyze the rhetoric of *The Normal Heart* in particular and Larry Kramer in general. Two representative articles are by David Bergman and John Clum. Bergman gives a detailed history of Kramer's activism before and after the production of *The Normal Heart* and presents a close reading of the rhetoric of the play and Kramer's journalism. Bergman argues that "no one is more responsible for the rhetoric of AIDS than Larry Kramer, whose various works seemed ubiquitous in the early years of the epidemic" and that "without his confrontational tactics, AIDS services and research might possibly have developed more quickly, but it is more probable that his methods hurried things along. And in *The Normal Heart*, he not only addressed the social responses to AIDS before audiences that usually ignore such issues, but he also created one of the more powerful artifacts of its period" (176). Clum also analyzes the rhetoric that Kramer used in his plays and journalism but finds that Kramer has two distinct voices: one addressed to a heterosexual audience and one to a homosexual audience. Clum argues that Kramer's "voice to his gay audience is that of an Old Testament patriarch. To the straight audience he is the representative gay man, the good fairy who will speak for what being gay should mean. To both he's a victim, raging at the causes of his frustration and hurt, but never moving fully beyond a language of victimization" ("Kramer" 202). In David Román's *Acts of Intervention*, a brilliant and exhaustive history of performance that responded to AIDS, he is critical of the official history that puts *The Normal Heart* and the contemporaneous but more

sentimental play *As Is* at the advent of AIDS theatre. He chronicles the many performances that occurred before these plays opened in 1985. He then presents a close reading of *The Normal Heart* which criticizes the politics of having a gay character die immediately after a non-state-sanctioned marriage; nevertheless, he argues that *The Normal Heart* "succeeded in its mission, having been staged almost continuously at the Public from 1985 to 1986 and thus reaching a wide audience" (*Acts of Intervention* 64).

There are also two notable book-length histories of U.S. and British plays by and about gay men and the changing culture that they reflected. The first is Harold Clum's *Still Acting Gay: Male Sexuality in Modern Drama* and the second is Nicholas de Jongh's *Not in Front of the Audience: Homosexuality on the Stage*. Each addresses *The Normal Heart* by arguing that AIDS made homosexuality a more acceptable topic in the theatre. As Clum writes, "It is a tragic irony that AIDS can validate gay relationships by showing the sacrifice and devotion of the caring partner toward his lover" (*Still Acting* 62). De Jongh points out that in 1985, when *The Normal Heart* was produced, "homosexuality was no longer regarded as illness or disease, and not inevitably as a crime" (*Not in Front* 2). Thus, the AIDS epidemic and changing ideas about homosexuality contributed to new plays by and about gay men of which *The Normal Heart* was a part.

Emmanuel S. Nelson argues convincingly in the introduction to *AIDS: The Literary Response* of the need for an anthology that focuses on the "creative response of

gay male artists" to AIDS because "it is the artistic response of gay men to their individual and collective sorrow and terror, their anger and helplessness—for it is gay men, at least in the western nations, who have been disproportionately traumatized by AIDS—that has resulted in the most poignant and enduring texts of the AIDS era" (Nelson 1). Along those lines, D.S. Lawson argues that there are two basic dramatic responses to AIDS: those of rage (like *The Normal Heart*) and remembrance (like *As Is*). He argues that *The Normal Heart* and *As Is* are the starting points for these two responses, but goes on to do close readings of many subsequent plays to show how these responses developed.

Considering that the historiography of Kramer and his work runs from those that are concerned about his artistic merit (like Kushner and Willinger) to those chronicling the response to AIDS (like Román and Nelson) to those chronicling gay theatre (like Clum and de Jongh), Kramer has certainly managed to find his way into the histories of both activism and performance. While all these histories will be taken into account, none examines the particular production of the Public Theatre's premiere of *The Normal Heart* using materialist semiotics. By analyzing the particular production and the reviews surrounding it, one can see that the production was framed as educational and that audiences were positioned as activists, and it is this perspective that shows how the production was able to accomplish its political goals.

War During Peacetime

While variables such as press coverage, advertising, the theatre's neighborhood, and architecture all influence what Susan Bennett calls the audience's "horizons of expectations" and "selection" process (Bennett 48-52, 108), *The Normal Heart* had another complicating factor: one month before the opening of Kramer's play, another play that dealt with AIDS opened at Circle Repertory theatre. The play, William Hoffman's *As Is*, is the story of two gay lovers who have broken up: one now has AIDS, the other is healthy and returns to take care of his ex-lover "as is." Its focus is much more on the personal aspects of a gay relationship than on the politics of AIDS, and it does not have the critical, angry stance of *The Normal Heart*. However, both received reviews in the national press, and even though they were not the first plays to take on the topic of AIDS, they were the first to receive mainstream media attention (Román *Acts of Intervention* 64). It is important to note that "the dominant historiographical narrative that positions *The Normal Heart* and *As Is*—both produced in 1985—as the earliest responses to AIDS in the theatre is not only inaccurate, it also does a grievous disservice to such artists, playwrights, and theatre collectives as Robert Chesley, Jeff Hagedorn, Rebecca Ranson, and San Francisco's A.I.D.S. Show Collaborators, among others, whose AIDS performances were produced as early as 1983" (Román *Acts of Intervention* xx). One reason these performances before 1985 remained relatively obscure is that they "were simply that, performances without opening nights, world premieres,

or the critical review process that facilitates their official registration into theatre history" (Román *Acts of Intervention* xxii). However, *The Normal Heart* and *As Is*

> generated an avalanche of press in both gay and mainstream publications, including major reviews in the *New York Times*. For the most part mainstream critics lauded the plays for introducing AIDS to the stage, virtually unaware of the various plays and performances already in circulation throughout the early 1980s. Since both plays were produced at major established venues and employed well-known actors, directors, and technical designers, a lack of critical coverage would have actually been more unusual. Indeed, the critical attention directed toward both these plays, but especially *The Normal Heart*, was unprecedented for any cultural text about AIDS at the time. (Román *Acts of Intervention* 58)

Indeed, beyond the "unprecedented" critical attention given to *The Normal Heart*, it also became the longest-running production in the history of the Public Theater, a title it still holds as of 2007. Because this dissertation is an examination of the political work of mainstream theatre and not a history of AIDS theatre, it makes sense to focus on *The Normal Heart* rather than the previous AIDS performances. This is not because *The Normal Heart* is more important than the previous performances, but because its position in the mainstream did a kind of political work less mainstream plays could not. In particular, it produced an awareness of AIDS in mainstream theatre audiences and the mainstream media that more obscure, unreviewed performances did not.

David Román credits the success of *The Normal Heart* to "remarkable shifts in both the quantity and nature of depictions of AIDS took place" from "*Life* magazine's notorious July cover story, 'Now No One Is Safe from AIDS,' to Rock Hudson's public

announcement and subsequent AIDS death" (Román *Acts of Intervention* 60). But the events Román lists happened months after the April 1985 opening of *The Normal Heart*. A more careful analysis of the conditions of reception during the spring of 1985 is necessary to understand its success. Such a methodology, moreover, allows the scholar to investigate how the production and its media coverage contributed to and made possible the subsequent media coverage devoted to AIDS in the summer of 1985.

Spectators of the Public Theatre production of *The Normal Heart* would have had varying amounts of knowledge about AIDS as they entered the theatre, ranging from GMHC volunteers who knew tremendous amounts, to people who had never heard of the disease.[15] Nevertheless, every audience member, regardless of his or her knowledge of the disease, would probably have been affected by the material aspects of the production. The architecture of the Public Theater is somewhat imposing with its red- and brown-bricked Renaissance Revival facade, and its stone steps leading to a large lobby with a vaulted ceiling. It seems especially grand in its East Village location where most of the other buildings are simple shops and walk-up residential buildings.

Once inside the building, audience members would have walked past pamphlets about AIDS from the AIDS Medical Foundation, GMHC, AIDS Resource Center, Health

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[15] If it seems unlikely that in April of 1985 there could be people who had still never heard of AIDS, remember that in February 1985 "the official position of New York City was that the AIDS epidemic was not yet a crisis" even though the city's "cases surpassed 3,000" (Shilts 533). And media coverage of New York City's crisis was scarce: "the first series of newspaper articles investigating New York's response to the AIDS epidemic were published, not in New York, but in the *San Francisco Chronicle*" (Shilts 533-34).

and Human Services, Children and AIDS, and the American Red Cross Home Attendant Program; there was also a study guide prepared by the AIDS Medical Foundation, printed lists of organizations and their addresses where the audience members could send donations, and lists of suggestions about how audience members could get involved in volunteering to help find a cure for AIDS and to care for its victims. All of this was located in a literature rack in the center of the hallway between the two sets of stairs that lead from the lobby to the Anspacher Theatre ("Audience Involvement at Public Production"). There was also a sign-in book for the audience members to leave their names and addresses; this information was given to the various AIDS support groups (mentioned above) for their direct-mail campaigns. The Public Theater also used the list for its own mailings and telephone solicitations. Inside the programs was an insert that read:

> 'What you can do!'
> 1. Go downstairs to our lobby and buy a 'Normal Heart' Tee Shirt, button or the actual published script. The proceeds will go to AIDS research and the care of its victims.
> 2. Get the facts about AIDS by picking up the pamphlets on display. Education and Funding are two of the strongest tools we can use to fight this dreaded disease.
> 3. Donate money to one or all of the various organizations that are involved in combating AIDS. Pick up a list that we have prepared of organizations that need your financial help.
> 4. Volunteer your time to one of the organizations now involved in the research of AIDS, the care of its victims, or educating the public through the various AIDS HOTLINES.
> 5. Tell your friends, family, colleagues, and students to come see 'The Normal Heart.' There is a 50% DISCOUNT for groups of ten or more.

> Please contact Clifford Scott in our Group Sales office, (212) 598-7107.
> ("Audience Involvement at Public Production")

The insert also stated that money made from the proceeds of the merchandise would go to the AIDS Medical Foundation, GMHC, and the AIDS Resource Center ("Audience Involvement at Public Production"). Audience members could have looked at this information either before the show, during intermission, or after the show. Regardless of when they looked at it, the information related the facts in the fiction they were viewing to the real world. This gave spectators concrete ways to get involved with the problems the fiction of the play presented to them. Also, and perhaps more importantly, the literature in the lobby "hailed" spectators as people who would *want* to get involved. It assumed a spectator who would be moved into action by seeing the needless deaths of young, gay men. *The Normal Heart* was not the origin of this emergent ideology—indeed, the emergent ideology probably originated in the earlier performances of AIDS that Román documents (*Acts of Intervention* xx, 64)—but the Public Theatre was a site with the ability "to take in, to assimilate, and to render more safe, more marketable, the products of any oppositional programme" (Bull 329). In the process it may have made the emergent ideology less "radical" (in Baz Kershaw's terms), but it also made the ideology more visible, and even without "radical" politics, it still interpellated the spectators as activists.

By using the proceeds of merchandise to fund organizations directly related to the political cause of the performance itself, the production was able to use

consumerism to further AIDS activism. This contrasts with Baz Kershaw's negative assessment of consumerism in the theatre; Kershaw criticizes the merchandise that inevitably comes with commercial theatre in the West at the end of the twentieth century by arguing that "the power of performance is sucked dry by the peripherals of theatre as it is transformed into a service industry with subsidiary retail outlets. The commodification of the theatre is achieved by reshaping the patron in the image of the consuming shopper" (47). *The Normal Heart*, however, used the money of the "patron" to further the production's activism and provided spectators with literature that instructed the "patron" on other ways to get involved—from philanthropy to volunteering. In this way, the space around *The Normal Heart* did not reshape "the patron" into "the image of the consuming shopper." Instead, it presented the spectators with a variety of ways to become activists. Though this would not have been possible without the Public Theatre and Kramer deciding to donate the profits to activist agencies, the downtown, Village location also contributed to this image as being "activists" rather than "shoppers." Since the Village is generally seen as the location of intellectuals and rebellious artists, the geographic placement of the theatre also contributed to the sense of spectator as activist rather than shopper.

Before any of this could happen, however, spectators had to decide to see *The Normal Heart*, and it is likely that many of them based this decision to some extent on advertising, especially before reviews came out. The main advertising that existed a

week before opening was a quarter-page ad in the *New York Times* theatre section; the ad was mainly white writing against a black background that read, "At least 300,000 Americans have already been infected by the AIDS virus, according to Dr. James Curran who heads the AIDS program at the Centers for Disease Control." Below the large quote was a small logo of "The Normal Heart" which is a valentine-shaped heart with the title written over it. Underneath the play's logo was more text: "A play about the most serious public health crisis of the 20th century" (Public Theatre "Pre-Opening *Normal Heart* Advertisement"). This advertisement frames the production as a serious discussion about the AIDS crisis more than as a piece of art. For instance, there is no claim that the play is well-written, riveting, or a great piece of theatre. Instead, the ad frames the play as educational by using the bulk of its space to quote a doctor from the CDC. Seeing the play as educational rather than artistic is a frame that was rehearsed by the reviewers.

Once the play opened, it received a considerable number of reviews. Because I did not see the production, it is not possible to put forth my own experience as representative of a particular group of spectators (as I could with *Homebody/Kabul*), nor can I compare my own experience with a review to contrast my reactions to the reviewers'. Instead, the reviews of the 1985 production of *The Normal Heart* must serve as evidence of reactions of reviewers and spectators to the production. In the previous chapter, I argued that because I agreed with a certain section of reviews, I could use my

own views of the production to stand in for a group of spectators: those who thought that *Homebody/Kabul* was a critique of the Bush administration's reactions to the World Trade Center attacks of 2001. In this chapter, I posit that reviewers' reactions are representative of a group of spectators, and I use the ritual view of communication espoused by Carey to infer a particular group's reaction to the play. I analyze reviews to determine how a particular periodical incorporated *The Normal Heart* into its ideology. From this I suggest that a member of that periodical's community of readers would likely have been interpellated by that review, just as I was by the reviews of *Homebody/Kabul* that suggested it dissented from the contemporaneous U.S. foreign policy.

The twenty-one reviews of the Public Theatre's production of *The Normal Heart* fall into three main categories. One small group of reviews suggests that it is a bad play with no redeeming qualities (Beaufort; Rich "Normal Heart"; Syna). Another small group argues that it is a good play with good politics (Kissel "Untitled"; Sommers; Watt "Tragedy"). By far the largest number of reviews sees *The Normal Heart* as a bad play that is redeemed by its necessary social message (Barnes "Plague"; Barnes "Gray"; Feingold "Part"; Fettner; Gussow; Henry III "Common Bond"; Hill; Humm; Kearns; Kroll; Manishchewitz; Massa; Simon "Untitled"; Smith; Wallach).

The reviews that came out on April 22, 1985 (the day after opening night) were generally negative about the aesthetic value of the play, but their reactions to the play's

politics and message were a mix of agreement and denial. Frank Rich, perhaps the most important critic then at the *New York Times*, wrote a review that included more information about the AIDS crisis than the *New York Times* published in the first years of the epidemic. Rich writes that *The Normal Heart* is "the most outspoken play around" and that its subject "justifies its author's unflagging, at times even hysterical, sense of urgency" ("Normal" C17). The justification for the "urgency" is the "foot-dragging" of "the Governmental, medical and press establishments… Mayor Koch, various prominent medical organizations, The New York Times… [and] most of the leadership of an unnamed organization apparently patterned after the Gay Men's Health Crisis" ("Normal" C17). Rich's review not only provided information to the readership of the *Times*, but also gave legitimacy to an emergent ideology that saw AIDS as a real threat and condemned official "foot-dragging." While the subject is "urgent," Rich blasts the play's "pamphleteering tone" that "is accentuated by Mr. Kramer's insistence on repetition… and on regurgitating facts and figures in lengthy tirades" ("Normal" C17). In the end, Rich does praise this "shrill" play, in part for its set, "a whitewashed box, on which are emblazoned the names and state-by-state death tolls of AIDS victims. While one wishes that the play's outrage had been channeled into drama as fully compelling as its cause, the writing on the theater's walls alone could drive anyone with a normal heart to abandon what Mr. Kramer calls the 'million excuses for not getting involved'" ("Normal" C17). Just like the literature in the lobby, this review interpellates its readers

as people who care about the AIDS crisis; it suggests that the community has "a million excuses for not getting involved," but that this play would convince those excuses to be abandoned.

Next to Rich's review was "a denial of Kramer's accusation that the [*New York*] *Times* had failed to cover AIDS and the defense that the newspaper had sent a member of the science staff to cover the story as soon as it had been informed of the existence of the disease" (Shatzky 133). This play generated a review that put facts about AIDS into the *Times* and even made the paper feel the need to defend itself. It therefore challenged ideologies of its readers in two important ways: first, it suggested that AIDS was a significant story, and second that the *Times* was at fault in its coverage of the epidemic.

Also on April 22nd, Douglas Watt of the *Daily News* found "many shortcomings" in the script, but wrote that almost all of them "are swept away by the immediacy and forcefulness of the drama" ("Tragedy" 38). He compared *The Normal Heart* to a Living Newspaper, and wrote that "you may find a lot to quarrel with in this evening, but there's no denying the factual evidence or Kramer's fervor, and you are bound to come away moved" ("Tragedy" 38). Here is a newspaper, which Carlson argues is a voice of "authority" (*Theatre Semiotics* 23), that confirmed Kramer's play as "factual evidence." Similarly, on April 22nd, Howard Kissel wrote in *Women's Wear Daily* that "if the facts were not so outrageous, so troubling, they might seem more suited to a lecture or an editorial" ("Untitled" 14). He, too, claimed that Kramer's play was factual; he also

mentioned the numbers written on the set and suggested that the acting saved the play from being agitprop. He ended his review by writing, "Over the years I have railed against Joe Papp for having confused kneejerk politics with theater… the resources of the Shakespeare Festival, often put to trivial use, are here applied to something major" ("Untitled" 14). By stating that the play is factual and relevant, these reviews challenged readers' ideologies by chastising the press's general lethargy regarding the AIDS crisis.

The other two reviews from April 22nd, however, did not agree that *The Normal Heart* was socially important. Allan Wallach of *Newsday* wrote that "Kramer's [play] fails to involve us deeply with its characters; it does not make us feel the loss and terrible waste when young men die of AIDS" (17). He called the play "shrill" and "polemical" and did not find redeeming qualities in it (17). This was nothing compared to Sy Syna's review for the *New York City Tribune* which was titled, "*The Normal Heart* Offensive and Boring." Syna wrote,

> There are several infuriating aspects of 'The Normal Heart': its interminable length, author Larry Kramer's need to set each scene up as an opportunity for one character or another to deliver an impassioned lengthy speech, and his demeaning equation of Jews during the Holocaust with homosexuals during the AIDS crisis. The first two merely offend aesthetically. They are examples of poor dramaturgy. His latter analogy, which permeates the entire play, is an ethnic affront. (6B)

Instead of addressing Kramer's analogy of AIDS and the Holocaust—which is certainly a debatable analogy—Syna blamed gay men for AIDS by writing, "Now that their 'alternative lifestyle' has developed lethal complications in the form of AIDS, an

internal conflict develops within the homosexual activist group which Ned founded" (6B). This review, then, unfortunately echoed an ideology that blamed gay men for AIDS. However, even this negative reaction still received coverage of AIDS into the newspaper, which was one of the goals of *The Normal Heart*, and an extremely important one as we will see later when addressing the review in the *Christian Science Monitor*.

Alongside all these April 22 reviews was press coverage of a surprise announcement by Mayor Koch. As Randy Shilts tells it

> Just hours before the first preview performance, as photocopied scripts of *The Normal Heart* circulated among the city's news organizations, Mayor Ed Koch hurriedly called a press conference to announce "a comprehensive expansion of city services" for local AIDS patients. Koch shifted responsibility for AIDS from Health Commissioner Sencer to Deputy Mayor Victor Botnick and instituted the plans for coordinated care and long-term facilities that had been proposed years before by AIDS clinicians. Included in the new $6 million program were pledges of expanded home and hospice care, day-care programs for children with AIDS, and funds for ten interdisciplinary patient care teams at hospitals with large AIDS caseloads. (556)

These were political events that anticipated the performance of *The Normal Heart* and, according to Shilts, they sought to lessen the impact of its accusations. They were reported in the media on the same day as the first reviews of *The Normal Heart*. This coverage of Koch's announcement also effected reception of the play, lending the production an air of activist journalism rather than theatre, which augmented what reviews were saying about it being factual.

After the opening night reviews came out, the Public Theater put out a new ad for the play in the *New York Times* that continued to frame the play as activism more than art. This half-page ad included carefully selected quotes from reviews (even some from reviews which disliked the play overall), but across and obscuring all the quotes from reviews was a block of text in a bigger, more dramatic font. This text read, "Once in every ten years or so a play comes along that fulfills my original idea of what role my theater must play in society. 'The Normal Heart' is that play—Joseph Papp" (Public Theatre "Post-Opening *Normal Heart* Advertisement"). In this ad, the political role of the play literally overshadowed the reviewers' opinions about its artistic merit.

In a number of reviews from April 25 to May 15— including a second *New York Times* review, this one by Mel Gussow[16]—the dramaturgical shortcomings continue to be noted, but less and less so as the political importance of *The Normal Heart* became the focal point. In Gussow's *New York Times* article, which to some extent revised Rich's earlier review, he compared Kramer's hero Ned Weeks to Ibsen's hero of *An Enemy of the People*, Thomas Stockmann. In Gussow's opinion, "The principal problem in 'The Normal Heart' is not Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (a subject that is not mentioned by name in the course of the play), or even the broader question of a bias against homosexuals. As Ned affirms, 'This is not a civil rights issue. This is a contagion

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[16] It is not normal for the *New York Times* to have two reviews of the same play, but this is what happened in the case of *The Normal Heart*.

issue.' In common with Stockman [sic], he is trying to staunch an epidemic. He is a whistleblower and he is surrounded by people who are worried about their careers, their images and their sex lives. Life itself is at stake" (B3). Gussow saw this play as less about AIDS than about people's inability to realize when it is necessary to give up petty differences in order to survive. While he criticized Kramer for not having the "irony" of Ibsen, he praised *The Normal Heart*'s "polemic purpose" (B3), and his review again interpellated readers as people presumably would prefer to remain alive rather than worry "about their careers, their images and their sex lives" (B3).

Michael Feingold, writing for the *Village Voice,* also compared the play to *An Enemy of the People*, and wrote that Ibsen's irony sees "the idealist as both necessary and a problem" ("Part" 105); he wished Kramer employed similar ironic techniques. Instead, according to Feingold, Kramer used Ned as "strictly an author's mouthpiece" ("Part" 105). Feingold ended his review by writing that "*The Normal Heart* can't solve the problems of the gay community any more than it can discover a cure for AIDS. What it can do is what any usable piece of political theatre does: nag at the viewers, rouse them to the prospect of accomplishing something. Kramer in person, like his hero, may be part of the problem; his play is at least a tiny part of the solution" ("Part" 105). *The Normal Heart* was again seen as dramaturgically flawed, but "part of the solution." This production could not only "rouse" viewers, it also presented them with clear actions to take. Instructions were laid out in the lobby displays that connected the play's message

to tangible activities spectators could take outside the theatre. This production did more than "nag"; it also provided the means to take action and interpellated spectators as activists.

While an April 25 review in the *Villager* found that Kramer "oversteps himself at times in references to Jewish apathy during World War II," the reviewer ultimately wrote that "'The Normal Heart' is a reminder that no one is innocent and that an age of self absorption, denial, and narcissism may lead to destruction as easily as a nuclear explosion" (Manishchewitz 13). This review was very similar to Gussow's since it takes the theme of the play to be less about AIDS than personal responsibility.

A later *Village Voice* review wrote that *The Normal Heart* "can provide something that's in short supply in modern urban culture, and not often enough perceived as a need in this crisis: a forum for public grieving" (Massa 106). The *Daily News* argued that *The Normal Heart* "tells us things we don't want to hear—for instance, the government spent $20 million investigating the seven Tylenol deaths while it largely ignored AIDS until it was a full-blown health crisis with thousands of dead and dying" (Smith 10). This review interpellated its readers as people who needed "a forum for public grieving" over dead and ill gay men (as opposed to an ideology that thought this disease was deserved because of a "lifestyle" choice); it also put into the public media the difference between the government's spending on the Tylenol scare and AIDS crisis.

While Clive Barnes of the *New York Post* experienced the writing of *The Normal Heart* as "banal" and "more of a tract than a play," he also wrote of its political importance and asked, "How many people of the thousands who will see the play, and be stirred by its sheer intensity and passionate concern, would have read the tract?" ("Plague" 17). Would a tract have attracted an equal amount of attention from the *New York Post* and had its message carried vicariously to the readers of the *Post* and every other paper that reviewed the play? Similarly, John Simon, writing for *New York*, argued that "what could have been a mere staged tract—and, in its lesser moments, is just that—transcends often enough into a fleshed-out, generously dramatized struggle, in which warring ideologies do not fail to breathe, sweat, weep, bleed—be human" ("Untitled" 92). This review framed the play not just as tract, nor even as simply a moving play, but as a play about gay men with AIDS that are nevertheless "human." In 1985, this was quite a remarkable statement, especially for a mainstream magazine like *New York*, and it would have challenged the ideologies of many mainstream readers. *Variety* also found *The Normal Heart* to be "strong agit-prop theater" and suggested that it was "flawed but socially worthwhile" and that it "merits consideration for production by nonprofit groups who want to hold the mirror up to contemporary American life" (Humm 106).

In May, as the buzz surrounding the play was turning into sold-out crowds and the first extensions of the run, *The Normal Heart* even received some positive reviews

regarding its aesthetics from the national magazines *Newsweek* and *Time*. Jack Kroll wrote for *Newsweek* that "Kramer produces not a series of debates but a cross fire of life-and-death energies that illuminate the many issues and create a fierce and moving human drama. It is bracing and exciting to hear so much passionate and intelligent noise on a stage again" ("Going" 87). This was one of the first reviews that argued that *The Normal Heart* was actually a good play based on its aesthetics instead of its politics, and *Time* seconded that opinion when its review asserted that what made *The Normal Heart* "so deeply affecting is that [it] portrays anguish and doom in individual human terms and enables audiences of every sexual inclination to grasp a common bond of suffering and mortality" (Henry III "Common" 85). These positive reviews did not mention its politics as prominently; because of this, they did less to spread the play's messages. However, these reviews did mention the "common bond" between people regardless of "sexual inclination" which no doubt challenged many readers' ideologies. But the work of *The Normal Heart* was less about "normalizing" homosexuality and more about educating the public about AIDS; in the analysis of *Angels in America* we will see more of how reviews helped normalize homosexuality in the mainstream.

Contradicting national reviews appreciative of *The Normal Heart*'s aesthetics, however, is a small review in *The Christian Science Monitor* which found the play to be "one-sided" and argued that "Mr. Kramer attempts unsuccessfully to combine a plea for responsible official awareness and treatment of a tragic health disaster with a

propaganda pitch for society's unreserved acceptance of homosexual lifestyles" (Beaufort 2). Given the magazine's religious affiliation, it is no surprise that it was not in favor of "acceptance of homosexual lifestyles," especially in 1985. The magazine's resistance to "acceptance of homosexual lifestyles" followed a conservative Christian ideology that would, presumably, match the ideology of most of its readers. But even the *Christian Science Monitor* author admitted that AIDS is "a tragic health disaster," implying that something ought to at least be done about that. The article explained in its first paragraph what AIDS was ("the medical acronym for 'acquired immune deficiency syndrome'") which suggests that readers may not be familiar with the epidemic, and, if that was the case, the article probably educated them. In fact, this is the first article I can find in the *Christian Science Monitor* to use the term "acquired immune deficiency syndrome," which suggests it may have been the first article about AIDS in the publication's history. If this is the case, the reviewer, as much as he disliked the play, added to the readers' knowledge of the world by explaining this new and deadly disease. By calling it a "tragic health disaster," he also implicitly argued for fighting the epidemic. This potential education and the corresponding ideological shift is an important outcome, even if the review did not lead people to see the play.

An article appearing in late May in the "gay" publication the *New York Native* argued that Kramer's "hysteria" might be justified. It is worth quoting at length:

> A few weeks ago [my straight roommate] told me she wanted me to move out because she was afraid I was going to give her AIDS. Understand, now, that my health is perfectly fine, as both my doctor and insurance company will attest. But *her* doctors tell her that while sexual intercourse seems to be how the virus is transmitted, there's no way of knowing the long-term effects of her sharing a bathroom and kitchen with a gay roommate. After all, he may be healthy *now*, her doctors say, but what if something's incubating away in his bloodstream? So this well-educated, cultured, and altogether lovely woman, a lawyer, gave me two weeks to clear out of the house. Too shocked and heartsick to even argue, I packed and left.
>
> Ned Weeks, the outspoken journalist in Larry Kramer's new play *The Normal Heart*, fears that the AIDS crisis could easily turn into another Holocaust, with gays railroaded into plague camps and worse. Weeks is dismissed by his associates as being hysterical. I thought so, too, and then three days after I saw the play, I had that little talk with my roommate. My God, if the woman I've lived with for all these years now believes that I'm a human time bomb threatening her existence, what're those yahoos in East Jesus, Missouri, thinking? Or the ones in Washington, D.C.? (Sommers 45)

While other aspects of the article are a more straightforward review of the play—including a description of the set, script, and acting—this anecdote captures the fear and panic surrounding AIDS at the time *The Normal Heart* was produced. It also captures how important it was for newspapers, even if only in reviews of a play, to be calling out governmental agencies on their failure to act, and to be calling AIDS patients "human" in mainstream magazines like *New York* (Simon "Untitled" 92). While no AIDS camps ever came into existence, it is impossible to know how much acceptance of people with the disease came from *The Normal Heart* and its media coverage; perhaps the play and other pieces of art like it prevented outcomes along the lines of Ned Weeks' fears. Importantly, the article also cites *The Normal Heart* as directly related to

his own personal experience; this again provided a writer with the opportunity to express an emergent ideology while using the play as an ostensible topic.

On July 25, 1985, over three months after *The Normal Heart* opened at the Public Theater, the famously masculine movie star Rock Hudson announced that he had AIDS. On July 28, 1985 "AIDS was on the front page of virtually every Sunday morning paper in the United States" (Shilts 578). As Dr. Michael Gottlieb, an immunologist at UCLA who worked on AIDS cases from the beginning, wrote, "There was AIDS before Rock Hudson and AIDS after" (Shilts 585); Dr. Gotleib and Shilts argue that Hudson's announcement drastically changed the frequency and quality of AIDS coverage in the media. After Hudson's announcement, the disease was public knowledge and even in the spotlight. This awareness of the disease created a new frame for *The Normal Heart*. As time passed, there was less and less talk of the play's "hysterical" tone in articles about the play. This shift in tone may have occurred because of previous reviews that already framed the play as factual, and perhaps because of the growing death count which effected more and more people personally. One review in October in the liberal *New York Native* optimistically suggested, "Someday [*The Normal Heart*] is going to be a standard script to be read in high schools" (Fettner 40). All these reviews, articles, and contemporaneous events regarding AIDS affected people's desire to see *The Normal Heart* and kept it running longer than any play at the Public Theater before or since.

The writing on the AIDS crisis of the 1980s is filled with war metaphors. Randy Shilts begins the epilogue to his masterful work *And the Band Played On* with an epigraph by Hermann Hesse: "There was no need to think at all of any reader but myself, or at the most, here and there another close war-comrade, and I most certainly never thought then about the survivors, but always about those who fell in the war. While writing it, I was as if delirious or crazy, surrounded by three or four people with mutilated bodies—that was how this book was produced" (583). This epigraph shows how gay men felt like they were at war during the early years of the AIDS epidemic, but the general public was unaware of this war. The emergent ideology held by these gay men that compared their experience to wartime was not yet part of the dominant ideology. *The Normal Heart* helped to change that. Joseph Papp recalled that

> Every night, at the end of *The Normal Heart*, ten, twelve or fifteen young men would sit there and be unable to move, absolutely stunned. Sit in their chairs, not leave. What would happen is, several other people in the audience, mostly men, would go over and sit with that person. Downstairs, another play called *Tracers* was running—a moving portrayal of young men dying in Vietnam. Exactly the same thing. All the Vietnam veterans would come over to a veteran, sit there and put an arm around him. You could have duplicated those two scenes. They both dealt with the same thing—buddies under fire, under threat of death. (Papp 266-67)

To those who fought AIDS since the early-1980s, it felt like they fought a war of which most of the country was unaware, a war during peacetime, and *The Normal Heart* was one of the first major acts that helped combat apathy, homophobia, and ignorance.

Through information given to audiences both during the performances and through pamphlets in the theatre lobby and reviews describing the play and its subject matter, *The Normal Heart* informed U.S. citizens about the epidemic. Even before examining the performance text and the aftermath of its production, it is possible to say *The Normal Heart* made a difference. It helped by making people aware of AIDS and giving spectators the means to become activists.

The Writing on the Wall

As already described, spectators of the Public Theatre production of *The Normal Heart* walked past pamphlets and mailing lists in the lobby before entering LuEsther Hall, a long performance space with a high ceiling. They sat on two sides of the theatre "basketball-court style" (Feingold "Part" 105); in the intimate space, spectators were close to the action on stage, and they could watch audience members across the stage "squirm as some particularly painful moment" was played out (Feingold "Part" 105). One reviewer described the sensation of "looking down as in an operating room" (Gussow 2:24). The set design by Eugene Lee and Keith Raywood surrounded the audience "with walls covered with numbers and names, state by state, city by city, of AIDS victims" (Sommers 45). According to Howard Kissel, "these numbers are the real setting against which the action takes place" (Kissel "Untitled" 14). Like a "Brechtian kaleidoscope," these numbers were constantly updated throughout the run of the production (Fettner 40). As literary critic Gregory Gross describes it, "these Brechtian

announcements flash numbers all over the stage and audience—numbers about AIDS cases, numbers about AIDS deaths, numbers of news articles printed in major papers, numbers of dollars spent, numbers of various dates and some corresponding and contrasting numbers related to the 1982 Tylenol scare. Along with the numbers, people's names appear in the fashion of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C." (64). Combined with the script and the mise-en-scène, these Brechtian elements in the design made spectators aware of the world outside of the fiction and prodded them towards taking action after leaving the theatre.

The plot of *The Normal Heart* is well-known so I will only give it a brief treatment here. It follows the story of Ned Weeks, a writer who begins a volunteer organization to combat the spread of a mysterious disease that preys mainly on homosexual men. AIDS and the GMHC are never mentioned, but the accounts are very similar to the disease and real organization. Because of Ned's confrontational style of activism, he is kicked out of the volunteer organization he helped start. Along the way, Ned meets Felix, a gay reporter at the *New York Times*, and they fall in love. When Felix is diagnosed with the disease, Ned cares for him until Felix dies. This love and dedication on Ned's part helps reconcile Ned and his straight brother, Ben, who up until then cannot understand Ned's "gay lifestyle."

As directed by Michael Lindsey-Hogg at the Public Theatre in 1985, the acting and set were based in the traditions of realism, except for the writing on the walls of the

theatre surrounding the audience. If there was no "fourth wall" because of the alley configuration, and if simple set-pieces were meant to convey an entire setting (a hospital bed to represent a hospital room, for instance), the idea was not to be symbolic but to suggest a realist set simply. This direction seemed an appropriate choice because the script itself was not often symbolic, preferring instead to chastise real public figures and institutions (Mayor Koch, the *New York Times*, the CDC, etc.). In fact, literary critic Joel Shatzky attributes the production's "electrifying effect" on audiences to the playwright not treating "the AIDS epidemic in symbolic terms" (134). He explains that since the play was produced at a time when the epidemic was so real, symbolism was not necessary and would have only taken away from the strength of the work. Kushner writes that *The Normal Heart* has "precisely one, and only one symbolic, metaphoric moment which gains much of its power from its absolute isolation" ("Foreword" viii). The moment to which Kushner refers is when Ned, frustrated beyond belief with Felix's refusal to eat anything but junk food, throws health food groceries to the floor, one by one, until a carton of milk explodes onstage (L. Kramer 113). This scene stands out because it is one of the few scenes without statistics, and numbers, and there is a visual, symbolic representation of waste and death that does not exist in any other scene in the play. Many of the reviews and the subsequent literature on *The Normal Heart* address the scene. John Simon, writing for *New York*, wrote that "we can choke back our sobs over a gallant death, but cry rightly over a carton of spilt milk" (92). Likewise, Michael

Sommers, in the *New York Native,* wrote that "the impact of a quart of milk splattered all over the place is indescribably shocking" (45). It is perhaps the key moment of the play's emotional resonance.

The power of an exploding carton of milk comes from the scene's deeply emotional content within the context of so many numbers and statistics. Gregory Gross points out that the play moves "from the big to the small, from the abstract to the concrete and from the general to the highly personal" (65), and this is exactly what occurs in the scene with the milk. After nearly two hours of long monologues full of statistics of the dead and dying, tirades about the numbers of newspaper articles or amounts of funding, Ned finally says,

> Felix, I am so sick of statistics, and numbers, and body counts, and how-manys, and Emma [Felix's doctor]; and every day, Felix, there are only more numbers, and fights—I am so sick of fighting, and bragging about fighting, and everybody's stupidity, and blindness, and intransigence, and guilt trips. You can't eat the food? Don't eat the food. Take your poison. I don't care. You can't get up off the floor—fine, stay there. I don't care. Fish—fish is good for you; we don't want any of that, do we? (*Item by item, he throws the food on the floor*) No green salad. No broccoli; we don't want any of that, no sir. No bread with seven grains. Who would ever want any milk? You might get some calcium in your bones (*The carton of milk explodes when it hits the floor*.) You want to die, Felix? Die! … Felix, please don't leave me. (L. Kramer 113, ellipsis in original)

This scene moves from the utter frustration that his partner will not fight (represented in Ned's line, "Die!") to the equal fear and horror of his partner's death (represented by Ned's line, "Please don't leave me"). After throwing the milk, seeing it explode all over

the stage, and shouting, "Die!" at the cowering Felix, Ned falls to the floor and Felix crawls through the milk and debris to hold him.

This scene is only a few minutes from the end of the play and by this point the audience shares Ned's frustration with the "statistics, and numbers, and body counts" that make up the bulk of the script, and it is at this moment of frustration that the play finally produces a visual representation of the loss of a generation of gay men. What could be a better symbol of waste than spilt milk, the loss of nutrients and the ability to help one grow? Milk is representative of a maternal, caretaking force that these men's lives lack as they attempt to take care of their own ill. It is a food staple of the young; its waste mirrors the waste of a young man dying. Seeing Felix crawl through it is akin to watching him crawl through a representation of all the young men's lives cut short. The fact that the milk and detritus from the rest of the thrown groceries remains onstage throughout the remainder of the play is a constant visual reminder of that waste.

Even if that is the only overtly symbolic moment in the play, realism is itself a symbolic representation of life, and Kramer's particular use of realism made *The Normal Heart* especially appealing to a wide range of spectators. David Bergman detects "at least three major strains" in *The Normal Heart*: "the grating soprano of the enraged child, the wounded contralto of the guilt-inducing mother, and the rasping bass of the humiliating father" (179). Bergman continues, "Because I hear these voices coming not only from Kramer's page but also from my own head, I respond to them with an

unusual intensity. Kramer's ability to address the subconscious of gay readers accounts in large part for the power he exerts on and the anger he arouses from [them]" (180). While Kramer's ability to cipher the interior voices of a gay man may account for the play's popularity with gay spectators, John Clum argues that "to the straight audience [Kramer] is the representative gay man, the good fairy who will speak for what being gay should mean" ("Kramer" 202). While Kramer's text may be tapping deep into the subconscious of a gay spectator, that same text may be showing a straight spectator a "good fairy," a positive role-model of a gay man. Nicholas de Jongh points out that "Kramer stresses affinities with heterosexuals rather than differences" (183). This can be seen in Ned's attempts to explain to his straight brother all the things they have in common, and by ultimately finding acceptance from his brother after the non-state-sanctioned death-bed marriage ceremony Ned and Felix undergo (L. Kramer 117). The reason *The Normal Heart* stressed affinities with heterosexuals rather than differences is explained by Clum's observation that it "came from those moments when he felt he lost his gay audience, when he felt separated from or betrayed by the groups he founded: after his 'snub' by the board of Gay Men's Health Crisis, which led to the writing of *The Normal Heart*" ("Kramer" 204). This might be another reason that Kramer did not seek out a "gay" theatre to produce *The Normal Heart*; he may have wished to reconcile artistically with a "straight" audience after his "snub" by the GMHC. Bergman writes that "placing the gay community within the bosom of the heterosexual family is, I think,

one reason why [Kramer's] work speaks so powerfully and uneasily to gay readers, for it suggests a vision of reconciliation that is both keenly desired and frustratingly delayed" (179). Likewise, "placing the gay community within the bosom of the heterosexual family" is surely a reason why *The Normal Heart* could be accepted so readily by so many mainstream, straight spectators. The title itself is a plea for that type of acceptance and it is easy to give when similarities between gay and straight communities are being stressed rather than differences.

While reconciliation between gay and straight cultures might have appealed to some spectators, there were many spectators for whom it did not. Obviously there were straight spectators who, because of homophobia, religious beliefs, or other reasons had no desire to see the gay community reconciled with straight culture. The *New York City Tribune* review that suggests that gay men's "'alternative lifestyle' has developed lethal complications" and suggests that the play is "offensive to anyone except a homosexual who feels that society has an obligation to pick up the tab for the unsavory implications of their 'lifestyle'" clearly does not accept Kramer's plea to be seen as one with a normal heart (Syna 6B). Clum has completely different reasons for being uncomfortable with the reconciliation desired in *The Normal Heart*:

> Through Felix, Ned has found a way to bridge homosexuality and heterosexuality and place his homosexuality within a paradigm that straight Ben understands. He may not support all his brother's political alliances, but he will support his marriage. Herein lies the subtext of *The Normal Heart*: the paradigm of marriage validates homosexuality.

> However, alas, Ned seems more content with the role of widower than with the role of spouse. ("Kramer" 209)

Clum criticizes this model of reconciliation because Ben does not truly support Ned's "political alliances," such as fighting for gay rights. He merely supports Ned's entrance into the "paradigm" of "marriage." Likewise, by stating that Ned is "more content with the role of widower" Clum suggests that Ned is more interested in finding acceptance from his brother than having an active partnership with Felix. De Jongh sums up this argument: "Weeks seems unable to appreciate that if you condemn, stigmatize, penalise and even ostracise an entire sexual subgroup, then once it achieves some liberation from its stigmatists, many in that subgroup will reject the forms and behaviours of those who have oppressed them. The play does not consider such an argument" (183). By stressing affinities between homosexual and heterosexual communities, Kramer overlooks legitimate differences and, while this is pleasing to some members of the gay and straight communities, it offends others.

Perhaps more importantly given this production's role in early AIDS education, Ned's condemnations of promiscuity—such as his statement that "having so much sex makes finding love impossible" (L. Kramer 51)—do not acknowledge that

> Gay Liberation did not cause AIDS. The dissemination of the HIV virus was assisted by the failure to take seriously the first prognoses of the epidemic's gravity, and by delayed programmes of political education and medical information. And the conception of gay marriages would no more terminate promiscuity than heterosexual marriages necessarily discourage adultery and fornication. (de Jongh *Not in Front* 183)

While educating the public that promiscuity could potentially lead to AIDS was absolutely essential in the 1980s, blaming AIDS on promiscuity is dangerously similar to the *New York City Tribune*'s review that blamed AIDS on the "gay lifestyle" (Syna). Furthermore, the play claims that "there's absolutely no such thing as safe sex" (L. Kramer 71). Bergman writes that this line "could be justified in the early stages of the health crisis as a reasonable response to a disease whose cause and mode of transmission were unknown" (178), but in 1985 enough was known about the disease to educate spectators about the effectiveness of condom use. As early as 1982 there was advice about the use of condoms to promote a safer way of having sex; for example, Michael Callen's forty-page pamphlet *How To Have Sex in an Epidemic: One Approach* was published in 1982 and reviewed in the *New York Times Review of Books* (Callen). In *The Normal Heart* "there is no discussion of the role that safer sexual acts may have on gay lives in the midst of the epidemic" (de Jongh 182). The relative lack of discussion about actions sexually active people can take to halt the spread of AIDS also contributes to what David Román sees as one of the "conventional concepts of dramatic tragedy" which presents "AIDS as a totalizing and inescapable condition, a condition with little or no agency to fight the powers contributing to the epidemic and with little or no hope for those affected" (*Acts of Intervention* 238). While this is a good critique of the script, it ignores some of the material aspects of the Public Theater production, such as the long lists of ways to get involved that greeted spectators both coming and going from the

theatre. The script may present AIDS as a totalizing force, but the script's failure to address ways to be sexually active in a less risky way does not mean the production gave actors and spectators no "agency" in this epidemic. The very act of presenting the play, seeing the play, and informing spectators about ways to take action, gave the actors and spectators an "agency to fight the powers contributing to the epidemic" in a way beyond what the script offered (Román *Acts of Intervention* 238).

Gross writes that the early plays about AIDS "are history plays performed in the midst of their own history. The players, the spectators and those walking around outside the theatre stand engaged in the same situation" (63). In *The Normal Heart* "what is testimonial and what is fictive… collide" (Nelson 2), and in that collision—such as the writing on the wall versus the words spoken by the actors—came much of the production's political power. The script itself may have presented AIDS as a totalizing force, but the act of performing the contemporaneous moment was an extremely empowering act.

There is much made of the Brechtian elements of the staging in contemporaneous reviews of and later critical writing on *The Normal Heart*. Almost all these references to Brecht deal with the statistics, names, and facts written on the walls of the set. Clum attributes this mixture of a realistic script with a Brechtian set to "Kramer's political confusion" and sees it as a failure of consistency of form (*Still Acting* 64). I am unwilling to see this inconsistency as a failure, however. For me both the realism and the

alienation are necessary to give the spectators a dual awareness of the reality of the fiction and the reality outside the theatre. Lawson suggests that "Kramer's abandonment of conventional stage realism" isolates

> his characters and their actions from a recognizable landscape [that] both allows a Brechtian distancing, whereby the audience can react critically and objectively to the play and formulate a politically correct response to it, and projects an image of homosexual men as pariahs, outcasts from a world whose ideology is so well perpetuated in literary and dramatic realism. (142)

But Kramer does not abandon realism. The script is quite realistic, and in the Public's production the acting and direction are all in the realistic tradition. The only non-realistic aspect of the production is the writing on the walls, and this single element is not enough to separate the characters "from a recognizable landscape." While the numbers may produce an alienating effect, it is also possible to be absorbed by the realist acting of a realist text on the minimalist but ultimately realism-based set. Watching this production, a spectator would move back and forth between alienation and absorption.

In chapter two, I argued for a particular definition of Brechtian "alienation" based on the writings of Min Tian, Viktor Shklovsky, and Craig Kinzer and Mary Poole. To recapitulate, I do not mean that when a spectator experienced "alienation" he or she was somehow emotionally disengaged from the production. Instead, I quote Shklovsky who argues that "art exists to help us recover the sensation of life" (qtd in Scholes 48).

The idea, then, is not that alienation distances spectators from the production, but that it awakens senses dulled from habit. I also argued and continue to assert, following Kinzer and Poole, that "alienation" can actually *increase* emotional engagement between spectators and actors. As Kinzer and Poole write, "the experience of actors and spectators implies that the key to Brecht's notion of alienation can be viewed less a question of *increasing* the distance between actor and character as *decreasing* the distance between actor and audience" (82). The decrease in distance between actor and audience is accomplished through reminding the audience of the reality of life outside the reality of the play. There were moments in *The Normal Heart* that made the spectators aware of the contemporaneous events that made up the AIDS crisis. This awareness allowed them to become a community mourning the dead and ill—and performing that mourning—alongside the artists who were performing the same ritual of mourning.

The Normal Heart is set in 1983, two years before its first performance date. That slight difference in time collided fictional time and non-fictional time: "when Joel Grey [the actor playing Ned Weeks] shouted something about there already being 40 deaths in New York City alone, all eyes cut to the number '4280' hanging over center stage. And shuddered" (Fettner 40). The spectators not only had the number "4280" to turn their eyes to, they also had each other; because they were seated in two sections across from each other, spectators were able to watch each other's reactions (Feingold "Part" 105). This review reports spectators being psychologically absorbed by the events

onstage, then becoming aware of the performance and their present situation (watching theatre).

J. Robert Cox argues that this type of alienation, which becomes a co-performance both by actors and spectators, can produce "remembrance and a refusal of silence" and in the process "re-position 'audience' as this larger community of memory/speech" (386). In the moment where fictional time and non-fictional time collided, a community was formed, not only among spectators, but also with the actors, and the production became a ritual that was about remembering the dead and refusing to be silent about how to save the living. This was, as Joseph Roach puts it, one of those times when a production made "publicly visible through symbolic action both the tangible existence of social boundaries and, at the same time, the contingency of those boundaries, their constructedness, their anxiety-inducing instability" (378). This production showed the horrible consequences of "social boundaries" that allowed a disease to run amok because it at first mainly affected gay men; but the production also showed the "contingency" of those boundaries, and the production and the literature in racks outside the theatre showed how to help change those boundaries and how to help save lives. In this sense, much like the Missouri State production of *The Normal Heart* that Cox and Roach discuss, the Public Theatre production challenged the audience's notion of community. It challenged "an imagined political community, … imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign" (Anderson 6). By publicly mourning the dead,

spectators and performers alike imagined the boundaries of a community that included themselves. As this community was performing mourning, it re-imagined its boundaries outside the theatre to include those who were dead or ill because of AIDS. This re-imagining (caused by alienation) combined with the opportunities to get involved described in the lobby made it possible for *The Normal Heart* to inspire action among its audience members.

If this seems too hypothetical, examine the eyewitness account of the Public's literary manager, Bill Hart: "There was something about this ritual going on downtown night after night after night in the theater. There was a kind of testifying going on, a kind of witnessing" (Papp 266). This "testifying and witnessing" were possible because of the production's juxtaposition of a topical, realistic script and performance style with a set made from contemporaneous facts and figures. This juxtaposition created moments of alienation that allowed the audience to band together as a community, to mourn, and, if so moved, to become activists themselves. The production, the information in the lobby, and the reviews all "hailed" spectators and readers as people who cared about the AIDS crisis and wanted to do something about it. Though this emergent ideology had been expressed in the alternative, "gay theatre" (Paller 238; Román *Acts of Intervention* xx, 64), when it was presented by *The Normal Heart* in a mainstream theatre setting, it was amplified by the national media. This amplification helped integrate the emergent ideology that AIDS was a crisis in need of

attention into the dominant ideology. Though *The Normal Heart*'s pleas for reconciliation with the straight community seemed inappropriate to some in both the straight and gay communities (Clum "Kramer" 209; Syna 6B), these sentiments were outweighed by articles like Mel Gussow's that reported that the production "could drive anyone with a normal heart to abandon what Mr. Kramer calls the 'million excuses for not getting involved'" and help stem the AIDS epidemic (C17). This representative reporting came in the widely-read *New York Times*, and, combined with the analysis of the production itself, this chapter reveals how *The Normal Heart* was able to be a factor that helped incorporate an emergent ideology into the dominant one. While *Homebody/Kabul* was able to give voice to a dissenting ideology through some of its reviews, it was unable to integrate that ideology into the dominant one; *The Normal Heart* was more successful at combining an emergent ideology and the dominant one because of the specifically "activist" tone in its text, advertising, location, merchandising and reviews. The next chapter, which examines *Angels in America*'s Broadway premiere, demonstrates how a commercial, for-profit production can also successfully be a part of the process of integrating an emergent ideology into the dominant one.

Chapter Four
Angels in America: Imagining New Citizens Into A Nation

The Road to Broadway

While the critics and media framed *Homebody/Kabul* as a critique of the Bush administration and *The Normal Heart* as AIDS activism, their response to Tony Kushner's *Angels in America* was markedly different. Positioning it as mainstream art, the press hailed *Angels in America* as a repository of hope capable of supporting an emergent ideology centered on gay civil rights. The Broadway premiere, in most critics' opinion, was a sign of the furtherance of these civil rights and a return of serious drama to Broadway. Frank Rich in the New York Times writes that *Angels* is "the most thrilling American play in years… that never loses its wicked sense of humor or its wrenching grasp on such timeless dramatic matters as life, death and faith even as it ranges through territory as far-flung as the complex, plague-ridden nation Mr. Kushner wishes both to survey and address" ("Embracing" C15). The play's subject matter and its content, however, were not the sole factors that elicited these expectations, for graphic explorations of AIDS and gay men's relationships had already become staples on the New York theatre scene. Eight years earlier, both the Broadway production of *As Is* and the Public Theatre production of *The Normal Heart* focused their attentions on these topics; and by 1994 "over sixty plays had opened in New York that either took people with AIDS as their principal subject or in which some aspect of the AIDS epidemic

played an important part" (Paller 235). Yet none of these enjoyed the fanfare associated with *Angels in America*. This is due largely to the horizon of expectations that surrounded the production. Critics, touting *Angels'* artistic value and universal appeal, contributed to the production's support of the concept that gay people belonged center stage. It was not a plea for acceptance like Larry Kramer's *The Normal Heart*; it was an expansion of what was considered mainstream, placing gay men at the center of this newly acceptable discourse. This chapter looks at the historiography of scholarly research on the play, the conditions of production and reception—particularly the media reaction—of the Broadway premiere, and the performance text itself in order to show how the 1993 production of *Angels'* and its surrounding discourse promoted gay civil rights, thereby demonstrating mainstream theatre's ability to support emergent ideologies.

The performance text of *Angels in America* promoted an emergent ideology centered on gay civil rights; embracing *Angels in America*, the press then took up Kushner's political project and worked to shift the dominant ideology. To understand the ideology promoted by *Angels in America*, a brief recapitulation of the plot seems appropriate. Starting in 1985, the play follows two couples and the dissolution of their romantic relationships. Prior and Louis, a gay male couple, live together. Their relationship falters under the strain of Prior's illness with AIDS. Meanwhile, Joe and Harper, a heterosexual Mormon couple, endure an unhappy marriage. Their

relationship finally disintegrates because of Joe's closeted homosexuality. One day, Joe and Louis meet, and over time, they begin a romantic relationship. This relationship ends, however, when Louis discovers that Joe is mentored by the ultra-conservative Roy Cohn whose own struggle with HIV is a major part of the play. Prior, in the meantime, begins either to hallucinate or to see angels. As part of this experience, he is eventually led to heaven where angels tell him that God has left and that humanity's "movement" (which is not exactly defined) is destroying heaven. In a few of Prior's hallucinations, he meets Harper, and, in their altered states, they reveal secrets to each other, which causes Harper to confront Joe about his sexuality. Because of this confrontation, Harper leaves Joe, and the audience last sees her on an airplane heading west and waxing poetic about angels and ozone. Prior refuses to be the angels' prophet of stasis and instead asks for more life, which he is granted. He survives with the AIDS virus past 1990 when the epilogue is set. In this epilogue, a ragtag group of friends is seen arguing politics: Prior and Louis (who are now platonic friends), Belize (an African American drag queen), and Joe's Mormon mother, Hannah. Prior speaks directly to the audience, declaring, "We will be citizens" and blesses them with the phrase "More life." He ends with the phrase, "The Great Work Begins" (Kushner *Perestroika* 146) Thus, with this final scene, *Angels in America* works to promote gay civil rights.

The production's support of gay citizenship and gay civil rights came in large measure, however, through its reception in the mainstream press. In its coverage of

Angels in America, the press took up Kushner's political project and pushed gay men from the periphery to the center of national discourse, thereby expanding the imagined boundaries of American nationhood and citizenship. The role of the press, as Benedict Anderson lays out in his groundbreaking book, *Imagined Communities*, cannot be underestimated, for the press plays an essential role in nation building. Anderson explains, each reader:

> is well aware that the ceremony he [or she] performs is being replicated simultaneously by thousands (or millions) of others of whose existence he [or she] is confident, yet of whose identity he [or she] has not the slightest notion… The newspaper reader, observing exact replicas of his [or her] own paper being consumed by his subway, barbershop, or residential neighbours, is continually reassured that the imagined world is visibly rooted in everyday life. (35-36)

Anderson's understanding of how newspapers promote national imaginings resembles James Carey's notion of newspaper reading. Carey maintains that the reading of newspapers is rooted in the ritual view of communication. In Carey's estimation, the press not only disseminates information, it also and above all works to build and maintain community. On the rare occasions when the information transmitted by the press changes, citizens are likely to digest and accept these discursive shifts. For example, in the early 1990s, when gay men became suitable topics for mainstream discourse, Americans largely accepted this shift and assumed that the "thousands (or millions)" who likewise read the daily paper accept this newly "imagined world" (Anderson 35-36). Because the reviews of *Angels in America* explicitly or implicitly

accepted a new group of people—gay men—into the mainstream, the citizens reading the papers were encouraged to re-imagine their definitions of the nation.

The ways in which the media approached *Angels in America* had a great deal to do with the timing of the play's premiere, the historical moment of which it was a part. To provide a brief history of the play text's development and its relation to its contemporaneous political milieu, the first part of *Angels in America: Millennium Approaches* was originally commissioned by San Francisco's Eureka Theatre and performed in Los Angeles at a workshop sponsored by the Mark Taper Forum in 1989. The following year, the Eureka Theatre produced it to rave reviews, and in early 1992, the Royal National Theatre in London staged its own production. Later that year, the Mark Taper Forum gave an early draft of the second part, *Angels in America: Perestroika*, a staged reading; and by November 1992 both parts of the play appeared there in repertory. Because of the play's direct criticism of the Reagan era and its opening of both parts in repertory at the Mark Taper Forum days before President Clinton's election, critics received *Angels in America* with a sense of hope that the 1990s would be a decade marked by gains in civil rights for gays and increased attention to the AIDS epidemic. These expectations in addition to the accolades following the play's pre-Broadway debut helped establish the future tone of the New York reviews. David Román's article concerning his attendance at the Mark Taper production puts this hope into historical perspective. He argues that "to watch *Angels in America* on the eve of the

[Clinton] election was to participate in a public ritual of hope" (46). It was, therefore, a chance for people who supported gay civil rights to come together to support a piece of art that made the emergent ideology they shared material, for as Román astutely notes, on opening nights, "the majority of the audience is composed of spectators already invested in the success of the production" (44).

Angels in America's opening night at the Mark Taper Forum, the ritual of hope that it created, and the emergent ideology it expressed all helped to articulate a "structure of feeling." A "structure of feeling," according to Raymond Williams, is the early articulation of an emergent ideology. Demonstrating this articulation, Román writes, "For many of us at the Mark Taper Forum on the eve of the presidential elections... a shift in the national AIDS ideology seemed possible" (53). Román and his companions at the Mark Taper Forum felt optimistic about a potential Clinton presidency, and many saw their roles as spectators at this play as analogous to their roles as voters in Clinton's possible election. They thought with Clinton in office, AIDS would be dealt with as a serious problem and, as a character suggests in *Angels in America*, gay men would become full citizens. Moreover, it seems likely that they even experienced what Jill Dolan calls a "utopian performative." Dolan writes:

> Utopian performatives persuade us that beyond this 'now' of material oppression and unequal power relations lives a future that might be different, one whose potential we can feel as we're seared by the promise of a present that gestures toward a better later. The affective and ideological 'doings' we see and feel demonstrated in utopian

> performatives also critically rehearse civic engagement that could be effective in the wider public and political realm. (*Utopian* 7)

Román's description of the "hope" that transcended the confines of the Mark Taper Forum and expanded to include the "ideological 'doings'" of the Presidential election hint at the existence of this utopian performative.

A crucial difference between the utopian performatives laid out by Dolan and those of *Angels in America* is that the latter's were carried outside of the theatre via the review process. For instance, a review of the play's Broadway premiere pleads with Kushner to "*Save us!*" and continues with hyperbolic statements about the play's ability to deliver hope in both the political and aesthetic realms (Heilpern "Millennium Approaches" 26). Likewise, a *New York Times* review of the Broadway premiere of Part II of *Angels in America* likens the play to a "benediction" furthering the idea that this play endeavored to create a better future through its blessings (Rich "Following"). These reviews, and those of their ilk, extended the influence of the production's utopian performative to their readers' horizon of expectations and suggested to readers that a utopian future was one of gay civil rights.

Angel's thematic linkages to contemporaneous political events further encouraged this sentiment of deliverance and cultural change. The play made its connection to real-world political events in part through its explicit references to President Reagan, Reagan's Attorney General Ed Meese, Reagan's ambassador to the United Nations Jeane Kirkpatrick, and especially to the conservative power broker Roy

Cohn. By commenting upon the selfishness of these figures, *Angels in America* echoed the criticisms lodged by the Clinton campaign against the Republican old guard. Opening on Broadway shortly after Clinton's inauguration, *Angels in America* became central to a new windfall in liberal sentiment. As president, Clinton became a repository of hope for those in and around the gay community who suffered so horribly under the AIDS policies of Presidents Reagan and George H.W. Bush. Andrew Sullivan, later writing for the *Advocate*, explained "[T]he origins of the gay love affair with Clinton are not hard to explain. Back in 1991 and 1992, Clinton was among the first candidates of either party to address the question of gay rights forcefully and eloquently. His promise to end the ban on gay men and women in the military was a stunning promise, unique in American history" ("Sex, Lies, and… Us"). While Clinton's infamous "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" policy may not have been universally satisfying, at the time of the *Angels*' Broadway premiere, he was still the darling of gay civil rights movement. And much like Clinton's election became politically symbolic of the increased support for gay rights, so too did *Angels in America* become culturally symbolic of this movement.

Angels' discussion of gay citizenship further linked it to contemporaneous political debates. In a 1993 interview in *Time* magazine, Kushner asserted: "We're at a historic juncture. In a pluralist democracy, there's a moment when a minority obtains legitimacy and its rights are taken seriously by the other minorities that together make up the majority. That's happening now for gays and lesbians. We're winning, and that

gives things a certain electricity" (qtd in Henry 212). Regardless of the ultimate success or failure of gay civil rights, during the early 1990s, the topic was one of great currency—one that propelled the Broadway production of *Angels* to the fore and conferred upon it "a certain electricity." The very fact that *Time* magazine participated in the furtherance of this discourse starkly reveals the ideological differences between 1993 and 1990. For example, three years prior to the Clinton election and *Angels*' Broadway premiere, Queer Nation circulated an anonymous manifesto titled, "I Hate…" that delineated the activist group's dissatisfaction with America's treatment of gay issues. The manifesto stated, "I hate that in twelve years of public education I was never taught about queer people. I hate that I grew up thinking I was the only queer in the world, and I hate even more that most queer kids still grow up the same way" ("I Hate…"). Following the maelstrom of press coverage sparked by *Angels in America* the continuance of such isolation is hard to imagine. The play itself, however, did not accomplish this political work alone; Clinton's campaign promises concerning gays in the military received enormous press coverage that outstripped that of *Angels*'. Yet, while Clinton's assurances ultimately proved empty, *Angels* delivered on its promise: It successfully positioned itself as a harbinger of a new era in which gays would be acceptable characters in mainstream entertainment. These conditions of production contributed to spectators' horizon of expectations. That is, audience members expected a work of superior artistic quality that justified the high-ticket price—a play of hope,

similar to the hope represented by Clinton's presidential campaign and election, that worked for an inclusive gay rights politics.

With the three productions prior to the Broadway premiere came many accolades, which helped to structure audience's horizons of expectations. The play won two Fund for New American Plays/American Express Awards, the 1991 National Arts Club's Joseph Kesselring Award, the Bay Area Drama Critics Award for the Best Play of 1991, the London Evening Standard Award, the London Drama Critics Award, the Olivier Award for Best Play, and, on the eve of the first preview performance in New York City, *Part I: Millennium Approaches* was awarded the Pulitzer Prize (Fisher *Past Hope* 60; Wilson 213). These prizes and the critical praise framed the *Angels in America* as "great literature." Because *Angels in America* was acknowledged as "art"-- not propaganda or harangues as with other plays dealing with gay matters—its reception more successfully promoted an emergent ideology centered on gay civil rights. This is because the play's status as "art" was frequently conflated with its "universal" appeal. For example, as noted critic Robert Brustein wrote upon its winning of the Pulitzer Prize: "*Angels in America* is being regarded less as a work of the imagination than as a repository of high cultural hopes and great economic expectations" (29). Its reviews, even the negative ones, praised its artistic merit[17], suggesting that its gay characters belonged in the artistic mainstream, and such reviews, either explicitly or implicitly,

[17] With one exception: Yale Kramer's review for *American Spectator* (Y. Kramer).

promoted the idea that homosexuals belonged in mainstream society. The production's advertisements were mainly comprised of glowing quotes from reviews and so furthered this discourse. Likewise, the production's geographic position on Broadway placed it at the center of U.S. mainstream theatre; its cultural position as "serious art" and "mainstream" was secured with its winning of the Pulitzer. Both these locations—physical and cultural—contributed to the production's support of the concept that gay people belonged center stage.

In addition to its touted artistic merit, *Angels in America* also enjoyed "great economic expectations," as described by Burnstein and revealed by its high-price ticket price (29). With tickets priced at $60 per part, *Angels in America* boasted the most expensive Broadway ticket to date (Gerard "Millennium").[18] Shows typically sold out, so it is logical to assume that spectators believed or hoped that the show was worth the very high price. Likewise, the ticket prices demonstrated producers' hopes in the show's ability to make money. By December 6, 1993, $3 million was already spent on the production, making it the most expensive non-musical production to date (Gerard "Two 'Angels'" 34). Nearly every review commented in some way on these high artistic and economic expectations and that the production lived up to them. For example, Jeremy Gerard, writing for *Variety,* begins his review with, "Believe the hype"

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[18] Though tickets were expensive, Kushner insisted Wednesday matinee and day-of tickets should be sold at a reduced price. (Brustein, "On Theater: *Angels in America*" 28.)

("Angels" 243); similarly, Linda Winer writes in *New York Newsday* that the production "has not been crushed by the hype and acclaim" (209).

Changes made to the scheduled New York City production further highlight the expectations of a high profit margin. Originally, *Millennium Approaches* was scheduled for production at the Public Theatre in New York City in 1993. Following the play's success in San Francisco, Los Angeles, and London, however, it bypassed the off-Broadway Public Theatre and was produced by Jujamcyn Theatres at the Walter Kerr Theatre on Broadway. *Millennium Approaches* opened on May 4, 1993, and *Perestroika* joined it in repertory on November 23, 1993. Likewise, Oskar Eustis, the director of the Mark Taper and Eureka productions, was replaced with the more noted director George C. Wolfe, who broke a previous commitment to take on the *Angels* project. While much of the cast and the blocking came from the West Coast productions, the New York program made no mention of Eustis. This omission prompted one critic to comment, "[Wolfe] also left enough of the L.A. production alone that the omission of any mention of Eustis in the credits seems impolite, if not unjust" (Winer 210). This was not the only questionable event surrounding the New York production. JoAnne Akalaitis, the producer at the Public who lost the production, soon vacated her position following this disappointment. Brustein suggests that Akalaitis' inability to secure the play for the Public led to her "departure" (Brustein 29). Interestingly, soon afterwards, in August 1993, Wolfe assumed her previous position (Pogrebin E5). While these events do not

prove any form of causality, they do provide food for thought. It is indisputable that Akalaitis was replaced by Wolfe at the Public soon after it lost its production of *Angels* to Wolfe's Broadway production. This chain of events suggests that the play was considered an important commodity.

Conversations About *Angels*

The efflorescence of scholarly literature triggered by *Angels'* Broadway production defies easy classification. Since 1993, two anthologies have appeared in addition to several book chapters and scores of academic articles. The volume of literature concerning the play has even inspired the titles of works that relate not at all to Kushner's opus.[19] Yet to provide a rough guide to the scholarly literature of *Angels in America*, perhaps, it is best to group the responses into the following eight categories: reviews of *Angels in America*'s 2003 television production; dramaturgical analyses; studies of notable, regional performances; discussions of the play's relation to postmodern theory; meditations on the play's identity politics; close readings of the performance text; reflections upon the play's historical moment and the early 1990s; and explorations of the play's relation to Brechtian and Benjaminian theories. While the majority of these studies insightfully work to deepen scholarly understandings of the play and its larger ramifications, none specifically address the New York City premiere

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[19] For example, there is Sarah Brophy, "Angels in Antigua: The Diasporic of Melancholy in Jamaica Kincaid's *My Brother*," Publications of the Modern Language Association of America 117.2 (2002).

as an object of study. This omission renders the vast majority of these works outside the scope of an analysis of the 1993 Broadway premiere that uses materialist semiotics.[20] Usefulness to a materialist semiotic project aside, the flourish of scholarly literature does reveal the extent to which *Angels in America* became a focal point of mainstream critical, academic discourse. This discourse, moreover, comprised a portion of the cultural field that helped in the creation and articulation of dominant ideologies. The widespread acceptance of *Angels in America* as a topic of intellectual inquiry added the play's emergent ideology onto mainstream academic circles, thereby helping issues of gay civil rights to the fore.

Two articles by Graham Dixon and Stanton Garner, Jr., deserve particular attention for they each suggest that *Angels in America* connected with spectators in a way that re-imagined the recent history of the 1980s. These articles forward this claim by relating *Angels in America* to postmodern theory, specifically the work of Jean Baudrillard. Concentrating solely on the play's script and neglecting other elements of its material production, Graham Dixon claims that "the Western world was starting to

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[20] Many reviews written about the 2003 television miniseries do not pertain to the 1993 Broadway production; they are part of a conversation about filming *Angels* that began in 1997 when Deborah Geis and Steven F. Kruger interviewed Robert Altman, the first director to be associated with the project (Geis and Kruger "Filming Angels"). The MFA theses and articles that focus on designing *Angels* and its various dramaturgical challenges, likewise, do not concern the Broadway premiere and are similarly unhelpful for a materialist semiotic analysis of the New York production. Discussions centered on *Angels* being produced in locations outside urban centers, often with reports of controversial results, tend to rehash the arguments Joseph Roach and J. Robert Cox posited in more detail regarding productions of *The Normal Heart* outside city centers. For these reasons, none of the articles from these strands of criticism about *Angels* are discussed here.

forget about death" until the appearance of "AIDS-as-virtual-catastrophe-yet-savior" (98, 108). Dixon argues that towards the end of the twentieth century, death had started to become a simulacrum of itself; it was something represented but to which few had access due to the mediatized nature of postmodernity. Dixon claims that when AIDS struck, it became a savior for it brought the West back into contact with death. He suggests that *Angels* employed America's newfound connection with death to create a piece of art more closely tied to reality than was previously possible. Yet, the performance text does not support Dixon's move to align *Angels in America* with the theories of Baudrillard. Returning to the text, we notice that Prior, throughout the play, argues for "more life." In the end, he is granted just that, and he, in turn, confers upon the audience the same benediction. Therefore, life--not death--is central to play's message. Despite this interpretive leap, Dixon's article does remind its readers that spectators related to *Angels* in a seemingly unique way—one that compelled viewers to reimagine history with gay men at its center.

Similarly, Stanton Garner, Jr., employs postmodern theory to claim the following: first, *Angels in America* re-imagines history; and second, this reimagining supports the potential for change. In other words, this process works to support emergent ideologies. Garner further maintains that "postmodernism is deeply informed by the rhetoric and psychosocial preoccupations of Cold War millenarianism, with its utopian imaginings and its even stronger apprehension of catastrophe" (175). Garner traces these influences

throughout Kushner's play and reveals critical weaknesses in Dixon's interpretation through his critique of Baudrillard. Garner states:

> Unlike Baudrillard, however, Kushner finds not the eclipse of history but, rather, the necessity (and the opportunity) of reimagining its form of legacy. Baudrillard's apocalypticism represents (like Beckett's) a form of mourning—in this case for the space of the real and for the tangibility of a history not lost to simulacra. Kushner, on the other hand, takes the apocalyptic invitation to history as a way of opening the spaces within its master narratives, affirming the lines of historical identity even as it radically reconfigures them. (Garner 181)

The "apocalypse" of history that Kushner imagines in *Angels* does not relegate history to death; it, instead, creates a necessity, an opportunity, to fill the narrative void with new historical narratives. *Angels* is not a eulogy for the "real" but, rather, an occasion to revise the stories that comprise the history of the 1980s. While Garner's article fails to address the production elements of the play, his argument that *Angels in America* encouraged the reimagining of history though its redrawing of boundaries is an important aspect in how the Broadway premiere supported the emergent ideology of gay civil rights.

Through its complex use of identity politics, the play re-imagines boundaries of personhood. Unlike the characters of *The Normal Heart*, the characters in *Angels* are not merely "gay men." The homosexual characters in *Angels* do not fall into the category of "they" but of "us." The gay characters are people who are also WASP, Jewish,

Mormon, Republican, married, and African American. Several scholarly articles draw out this phenomenon and reflect this diversity of identity. As a consequence, these meditations can roughly be broken down into those concerning race (Frantzen "Prior"; Minwalla), religious identity (Kruger; Solomon "Wrestling"), gender (Meisner), and sexuality (Fisher "Angels of Fructification"; Frantzen *Before the Closet*; Kekki). Focusing on the performance text, these pieces all look at the ways in which *Angels* is able to "recognize the multiple determinants of identity… its differential constitution in relation to other determinants of identity" (Kruger 153). In other words, according to the operative assumptions of the play, a character's identity is not shaped solely by sexuality, but is also molded by multiple factors. In this way, *Angels in America* enjoys a more complex relationship to identity politics and possesses a more inclusive sense of societal insider—so much so that it re-imagines gay men as constituents of groups already in the mainstream.[21]

Scholars, undertaking close readings of the *Angels'* script, have noted that in addition to their inclusion in the mainstream, gay men are counted as members of the nation, a key step in the promotion of gay citizenry. One article that addresses this trend towards inclusion is Jonathan Freedman's. Discussing the play in relation to antisemitism, Freedman argues that what begins as an ambitious project of queering

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[21] Remembering the complexity of this play's characters—particularly when addressing *Angels'* surprising lack of class as a determining factor for its characters—is extremely important when questioning whether the play substitutes identity politics for a more materialist politics.

Jewishness "collapses into a traditional assimilationist answer to the questions of Jewish identity it has bravely raised" (92). While Freedman does not find assimilation to be a sufficiently radical goal, he fails to offer a means of challenging the dominant ideology other than one that convinces the mainstream to accept an attenuated emergent ideology. Amy Schindler expounds further on this subject of assimilation in her consideration of the symbolism of angels and their universalist theme. She contends "that angels reached new heights in popularity from 1990 through 1996 because an angel represents a spiritual but non-judgmental sign of divine intervention to help people deal with the AIDS crisis" (49). The play reflects this sentiment and shows how its characters, whether Protestant, Mormon, or Jewish, all relate to angelic symbol. For that matter, extending beyond the text, the play's spectators, which presumably spanned a variety of religions and sects, could grasp the symbolism of angels. This non-judgmental spiritualism, therefore, is a sign of inclusion and assimilation across belief systems. The angelic symbolism elides important differences between faiths, but nevertheless, it also allows divergent characters, and—by extension—a variety of spectators, to relate to one another.

Much like *Angels* works to overcome religious difference, it blurs the lines between generations of theatre texts. Peter F. Cohen, for instance, argues that though "critics have worked to solidify divisions between 'first' and 'second generation' AIDS plays, important similarities between texts relegated to opposing ends of this great

divide have been rendered increasingly visible" (197). Marshalling *The Normal Heart* and *Angels in America* as his examples, Cohen shows how both use standard love story plots peppered with overtly political concerns in order to drive their messages of inclusion home. Both, moreover, hint at the primacy of their political messages. *The Normal Heart* forwards this message after the death of Ned Weeks' lover removes the possibility of a successful romantic ending (Cohen 204). *Angels in America*, likewise, does similar work. Because none of the couples end up together and because the epilogue is spoken collectively, the play "ends up undermining *all* its love stories in favor of a vision of collectivity and a call for social change" (Cohen 299). For Cohen, *The Normal Heart* and *Angels in America* are more similar than dissimilar in that each argues in favor of a political collective—one that is suggestive of inclusion and assimilation. Despite the sympathies found between first and second generation AIDS plays, Michael Cadden still maintains that works such as *Angels in America* articulate a more profound message of inclusion. Discussing the "pinklisting" of Roy Cohn in *Angels in America*, by which Cadden means the inclusion of Cohn within a pantheon of historical figures believed by some to be gay,[22] he asks, "How embracing was our sense of community? Did it encompass an implacable foe like Roy? … Kushner's play answers with what I take to be an uncomfortable yes—and that yes is precisely the distance between a first-

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[22] Interestingly, Cadden's prime example of pinklisting is Larry Kramer's character Ned Weeks from *The Normal Heart* who lists names from Plato to E. M. Forster (Kramer Normal Heart 114).

generation AIDS play like *The Normal Heart* and a second-generation work like *Angels in America*" (83). Cadden's observation that inclusion is *the* important difference between the two plays demonstrates the centrality of inclusion for *Angels in America*. To further understand how this concept of "inclusion" reached broader audiences, an examination of the Broadway production reviews is necessary. Such an undertaking reveals one means by which the emergent ideology of gay citizenship reached the mainstream.

While no articles specifically analyze the Broadway premiere of *Angels*, some address the production's historical moment; this scholarship focuses mainly on the play's "utopian" fantasy of a more inclusive democracy—a theme symbolized by the production and solidified through Clinton's election. Ron Scapp deploys a speech of Ronald Reagan's to derive a metaphor that views the U.S. as a car driving towards a utopian future. Scapp asserts that "*Angels in America* is an attempt to extend the political imagination of Americans through fantasy, that is to say, to broaden the fantasy of democracy through a 'gay fantasia on national themes'" (93). Scapp, however, does not employ material evidence in his analysis, and, as a result, he fails to provide proof that *Angels in America* was successful in this broadening of "the fantasy of democracy" through its inclusion of gay men as "universal" subjects for "art." Picking up on historical concerns similar to Scapp's, David Savran queries "Why is a play featuring five gay male characters being universalized as a 'turning point' in the American theater and minoritized as the preeminent gay male artifact of the 1990s?"

("Ambivalence" 14). This quote echoes a central thesis found in Eve Kosofky Sedgwick's *Epistemology of the Closet*. Sedgwick writes:

> It is the paranoid insistence with which the definitional barriers between 'the homosexual' (minority) and 'the heterosexual' (majority) are fortified, in this century, by nonhomosexuals, and especially by men against men, that most saps one's ability to believe in 'the homosexual' as an unproblematic discrete category of persons. (83-84)

It is this idea of a "discrete" category of "the homosexual" that *Angels* somewhat challenges. Through its presentation of multifaceted characters who are not reduced to their sexuality and through its use of the ambiguously inclusive "we" of the epilogue,[23] *Angels in America* suggests that its representations of gay men are not as "discrete" as those found in plays such as *The Normal Heart*. Because the "we" in *Angels* may be read "universally" or may be taken to refer solely to the gay men onstage, the play itself may be approached both as a universalized "'turning point' in the American theater" and as the minoritized "preeminent gay male artifact of the 1990s" (Savran "Ambivalence" 14). Savran's treatment of *Angels'* utopian vision is also noteworthy. Using the theories of Bourdieu, Savran argues that while *Angels in America* may appear radical, "the appearance of the Angel signals the degree to which utopia—and revolution!—have now become the product of commodity culture" ("Ambivalence" 19). Because the play itself is a commodity and because, according to Savran, *Angels* imagines a utopian

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[23] "We will be citizens" (Kushner, *Perestroika* 146).

future through the lens of this commodity, even revolution itself is simply part of what *Angels* is selling. Nevertheless, this commodification did important ideological work, a fact Savran overlooks. This sale in the mainstream injected the play's palatable vision of gay citizenship into the national imagination. If the production had not been a part of the culture industry, it could not—by definition—have been part of the U.S. mainstream. In order to help the general public imagine a more inclusive democracy, the *Angels in America* Broadway premiere needed its popular commodity status; this status may have mitigated some of the play's radical potential, but it nonetheless placed gay characters at the center of a revisionist national history of the 1980s—a history that was met with great popularity.

Angels' potential to revise history has been the focus of much scholarly debate. This potential, likewise, begs for a consideration of Benjaminian and Brechtian analysis, for the play's Broadway production, despite its position as commodity in the culture industry, possessed the ability to articulate a newly inclusive vision of American nationhood. Even articles that do not explicitly address Kushner's use of these theorists acknowledge that the Angel of the play is purportedly based on the Benjamin's angel in "Theses on the Philosophy of History." Kushner reports that while reading Benjamin's essay, he was struck by the philosopher's understanding of history as: "a chain of events… one single catastrophe… this storm irresistibly propels [the angel] 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" (Benjamin 257-58). Harkening to this chaos, Kushner's angel ultimately tells Prior Walter that humanity "MUST STOP MOVING!" for mankind's progress is destructive (*Perestroika* 44). Indeed, Benjamin's angel might well share this sentiment. Writing in *Modern Drama*, Charles McNulty notes that Kushner's play is, in fact, a representation of Benjamin's theory of history. McNulty further claims that the catastrophe of AIDS created the possibility for radical social change by placing gay men, people previously on the periphery of mainstream history, in the center (13). In other words, the historical catastrophe that befell gay men in the U.S. in the 1980s and Kushner's representation of that decade-old history *include* gay men in the dominant ideology in a new way.[24] This production would not have been part of the dominant ideology if it had taken place in a small off-off-Broadway theatre, for the central positioning of its gay characters would not have had the same efficacy. Because of the play's position on Broadway, in the heart of the mainstream, its message became normalized, and, ultimately through its reception, *Angels*' was received into the dominant ideology. Janelle Reinelt maintains, however, that the political potential of the epic or Brechtian aspects of *Angels* were not realized in its Broadway production. In her article "Notes on *Angels in America* as American Epic Theatre," Reinelt compares the Eureka Theatre and Broadway productions to argue that the production in New York defused much of the text's epic potential (Reinelt 234-244). This diffusion, nevertheless,

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[24] The 1993 premiere was almost exactly ten years after the CDC declared AIDS an epidemic.

may have been necessary in order to make the Broadway production more palatable to mainstream audiences.

In all, a survey of the literature devoted to *Angels in America* provides four conclusions relevant to this study. First, the play in conjunction with postmodern theory instructs scholars that the lack of historical representation is something that should be mined for potential rewritings of history. Second, Kushner's sophisticated understanding of identity politics produces multi-dimensional characters that are not demarcated solely by sexuality. As a result, the play is able to re-imagine homosexuality as one among many defining traits. Third, *Angels*, is in many ways, an assimilationist project, which, despite its severe limitations and drawbacks, allows for a redefinition and expansion of the body politic. Fourth, while the work's hopeful invocation of "utopia" and "revolution" may reveal its status as a commodity, it is precisely because of its position inside the culture industry that *Angels* was able to re-imagine who was included inside the official history of the United States. These conclusions, however, are limited for they have been drawn from scholarship based solely upon close textual readings. From this foundation, this discussion will push the scholarship further by analyzing *Angels in America* using materialist semiotics in an attempt to understand the political work accomplished by the Broadway premiere. Yet before the production itself can be addressed, its conditions of reception must be analyzed to understand the horizon of expectations with which the spectators came to the show.

Buying an Ideology

The academic discourse that currently surrounds *Angels in America* came well after the 1993 Broadway production. Much of the literature is an attempt to understand the popularity of the play and its near instantaneous canonization. Deborah Geis and Steven Kruger discuss the necessity for their first anthology of essays on *Angels* by asserting that the play profoundly influenced many fields of art and scholarship from "dramaturgy to queer theory, from AIDS activism to Brechtian[-style] epic theatre" ("Introduction" 1). Moreover, they approach *Angels* as "theatrical texts, as literary work, as popular culture phenomenon, as political reflection and intervention" ("Introduction" 1). While embracing Geis and Kruger's comprehensive approach, this study furthers their work by analyzing not only the conditions of reception, but also by focusing on the Broadway premiere in with great depth. Because Broadway is the locus of the theatrical mainstream in the U.S., studying the Broadway production of *Angels* provides insight into how politics and mainstream theatre relate. By contributing to what David Román calls the "official registration into theatre history" (*Acts of Intervention* xx), articles about the *Angels in America* Broadway premiere in *GQ*, *Vogue, Vanity Fair, Time*, and *Newsweek* helped confirm the play's mainstream classification (Friend; Hitchens; Kaylin; Newsweek; "Theatre: Gays at Center Stage").

The mainstream status of *Angels* began what Susan Bennett calls the "selection" process and the "horizon of expectations" before potential spectators even bought their

tickets (Bennett 48-52, 108). Once the New York reviews began to circulate, the critics' superlatives only heightened positive expectations for potential spectators. The publicity for the show focused mainly on the play's accolades, printing quotes from reviews in full-page advertisements in the *New York Times*. The play's physical location on Broadway, in the Walter Kerr Theatre, cemented the play's mainstream status and contributed to potential spectators' high expectations. In the center of the Broadway theatre district near Times Square, the Walter Kerr was newly restored in 1990 to resemble a "classic" Broadway theatre with its ornate façade, neo-classic lobby, and velvet-trimmed seats. In the plush, newly renovated theatre, the production of *Angels in America* was geographically and spatially attached to "classic" Broadway writing, such as *Murder in the Cathedral* by T.S. Eliot and Walter Kerr's own Pulitzer-winning criticism and playwriting, that came before it. For a point of contrast, if the New York premiere of *Angels* had hypothetically been an off-Broadway production—at the Public Theatre, perhaps—the counter-cultural East Village location would have, likewise, informed its reception. Instead of being seen as "universal" art, it might well have been framed as "activism" similarly to *The Normal Heart*. That notwithstanding, the Broadway location helped contribute to the play's nearly instantaneous branding as a "classic."

What ideology did spectators buy when they bought tickets to the Broadway premiere of *Angels in America*? As with the previous case studies, the neighborhood,

theatre architecture, and the theatre amenities and merchandise are all evidentiary fragments that work to answer this question. To begin, the Walter Kerr lobby boasted a variety of amenities including drinks, snacks, and merchandise, which included shirts, hats, and posters. Unlike the merchandise for *The Normal Heart*, the revenue for *Angels'* merchandise did not go to AIDS activist organizations; the profits went to the producer, Jujamcyn Theatres, which fought hard to get the rights to produce this play. The spectators, who had purchased the record-priced tickets and who bought for-profit merchandise, were consumers of this cultural production in every sense of Baz Kershaw's critique. In his book *The Radical in Performance: Between Brecht and Baudrillard*, Kershaw writes, "The commodification of the theatre is achieved by reshaping the patron in the image of the consuming shopper" (47). However, this consumerism did not render the support of the play's emergent ideology impossible. When a spectator decides to buy tickets, he or she "is always buying another's ideology" (Bennett 118). By purchasing tickets, a spectator implicitly and financially supports the ideology that the production is advertising and that reviews put forth. It logically follows that the same would hold true for the merchandising. Wearing an *Angels in America* shirt or cap in 1993 may not have constituted activism, but it surely had ideological implications. Yet to understand fully what ideology the spectators were buying, an even more important aspect of the conditions of reception must be examined: the production reviews.

Reviews often "determine a very specific set of expectations in the audience and thus determine how that audience will receive the play" (Bennett 122). As noted in previous chapters, the discourse of a play frequently goes beyond the bounds of the theatre through its reviews. The reviews of a production are also evidence of how a production was integrated into a particular periodical's ideology. By looking at reviews, one can speculate on spectators' expectations of the production, how the production's discourse was incorporated into a periodical's ideological discourse, and what ideology a spectator would choose to buy in the form of tickets and/or merchandise based on that incorporation. Again, Carey's theory about the ritual view of communication is the basis of this analysis; Carlson's concept that theatre reviews have a particular authority is also taken into account, as is Geertz's argument that art brings ideas into the physical world. A review of a production is material evidence of how a periodical incorporated into its ideology an idea made material by art; by documenting one spectator's—that is, the critic's—reaction to the production, the review suggests the reaction of a group of spectators.[25]

There are two sets of reviews pertaining to the Broadway premiere of *Angels in America*. The first set is by far the largest: they consist of reviews from *Millennium Approaches* that date from the play's May 4 opening to July of 1993. The second, much

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[25] This was seen when my own reaction to *Homebody/Kabul* was closely aligned with reviews that (inaccurately) proclaimed the production to be a direct critique of the Bush administration's foreign policy.

smaller set of reviews is for *Perestroika,* which opened in November 1993. While the reviews' tenor vary to some extent, they can be broken into four main categories: positive reviews that avoid politics; reviews that claim the play as art not propaganda, and call for the play's inclusion among the canon of important U.S. theatre; reviews that acknowledge the play's politics as a sign of hope but continue to approach the play chiefly as art; and reviews that focus primarily on the play's politics.

The reviews that are the most straightforward are also some of the most positive. They largely assert that the production lives up to its hype and that seeing the play constitutes "a fun night out." This approach furthers the normalization of gay men by avoiding potentially controversial questions of sexuality and by focusing on the enjoyment of the play. This line implicitly forwards the idea that gay men, themselves, are inoffensive and worthy of mainstream attention. For example, Jeremy Gerard, writing for *Variety,* argues "in a world where heightened expectations—and with a record-breaking top ticket price of $60 they will be exceptionally high—are typically dashed, 'Angels in America' delivers the theatrical goods in spades" (Gerard "Angels" 243). Overlooking politically enlightening or potentially contentious moments, such as the cross-gender casting, Gerard simply treats the play as amusing. He describes: "the actors play multiple roles, with the women… also playing men, contributing to the fun—and it should never be forgotten how much fun 'Millennium Approaches' is" ("Angels" 244). Similarly, Linda Winer writes in *New York Newsday* that "for all the

political rage and the scathing unsanitized horror, the hours zip by with the breezy enjoyment of a great page-turner or a popcorn movie" (209). *Newsweek* echoes these sentiments with its review that begins: "Hype or no hype, 'Millennium' is the biggest, most intelligent, most passionate American play in recent memory" (Kroll 213); and *USA Today* states that "the big surprise is how funny it is… With its futuristic vision, *Angels* is a spiritual survival kit for the 21st century. And laughter is among its primary tools" (Stearns 219). Doug Watt, writing for the *Daily News,* describes the play's opening: "a rabbi… delivering some trenchant comments, but for some inexplicable reason the rabbi has been made into a stooped vaudeville figure with a long white beard" (220). Though less explicit than the *Variety* review, Watt's article suggests with its reference to "vaudeville" that the cross-gender casting is more for entertainment than for political critique. In his *New York* review, John Simon sums up this first group of reviews through its avoidance of politics and its breezy tone: "for all its three and a half hours, the play doesn't ever bore you" (207). By stressing that the production not only lives up to its hype, but also is fun to watch, and by paying little attention to the potentially controversial elements of the play, these reviews contribute to the production's mainstream status; certainly none mention the (possibly offensive) on-stage simulated sex between two men. This not only created an expectation in spectators that they would have a good evening at the theatre, but also that the play would be squarely in the entertainment mainstream as defined by periodicals like

Variety, *USA Today*, and *Newsweek*. Even if spectators were offended by the play, they would know that mainstream reviewers thought a play that argued for gay citizenship and that portrayed the Reagan era as one of selfishness was "fun." The reviews' silence point to their implicit acceptance of the play's politics and to their understanding that there is nothing wrong with gay men being, as the *Newsweek* title puts it, "Center Stage."

More common than the pervious set of reviews are ones that actively view that the production as art—not propaganda. *Angels*, in the eyes of these reviewers, is a work of universal artistic themes and broad appeal that deserves its rightful place within the Western dramatic canon. By framing the play as universally accessible art, these reviews reveal an important critical acceptance of *Angels*' discussion of gay men as citizens. The influential *New York Times* critic Frank Rich argues that "the play is a political call to arms for the age of AIDS, but it is no polemic" ("Embracing" C15). This interpretation is important because, unlike earlier AIDS plays such as *The Normal Heart*, Rich refuses to find any polemical moments within the play; he, instead, views the play not as politically grating but as artistic. Clive Barnes, in the *New York Post*, likewise connects the play to art by invoking the canon: "[*Angels*] works from a concept of those Big Themes that have seduced American playwrights from O'Neill onward" (210). In an interesting contrast to the reviews that merely praise the play's amusement value, Barnes writes that even though "no one has done this kind of bitch-camp humor

better," the comedic elements detract from the play's "more serious purpose" (Barnes 210). On the one hand, in the gay coding of the "bitch-camp humor," Barnes implicitly suggests that those supposedly "gay" elements of the play detract from the work's "seriousness." On the other, Barnes continues to include the play's gay characters as key players in the U.S. canon's "Big Themes." In a less ambivalent move, *Time* magazine connects the play to both the mainstream and the canon when its reviewer writes, "Angels has indeed electrified reviewers with its radical political perspective and literary style, but is [sic] at heart a fairly conventional drama about the intersections of three households in turmoil" (Henry 212). While the reviewer finds something indistinctly "radical" in the play, the play itself is typical, despite the fact that gay couples comprise two of the "households in turmoil." In finding these gay domestic scenes "fairly conventional," the review supports the emergent ideology that gay men are, indeed, "conventional." The review in *The New Yorker* also suggests the play is art: "Here, teeming with good talk and good humor, is that almost forgotten ingredient of contemporary American theatre—good story. Instead of doing 'political theatre,' Kushner does theatre politically" (Lahr 208). The extremely influential theatre critic Robert Brustein writes in *The New Republic* that if you:

> compare [*Angels*] with any recent entry on the same subject… you will see how skillfully Kushner navigates between, say, the shrill accusations of Larry Kramer's *The Destiny of Me* and the soggy affirmations of William Finn's *Falsettos*… [Kushner's] very literate play once again makes American drama readable literature. ("Angels in America" 29)

With this comparison, Brustein explicitly removes Kushner's work from the category of polemics and securely places it into the category of "literature." Brustein also goes on to suggest that *Angels in America* is universal by calling Kushner "a strong-voiced, clear-eyed dramatic artist capable of encapsulating our national nightmares into universal art" ("Angels in America" 29). By arguing that *Angels* is "universal," Brustein canonizes the piece. This rhetorical process situates *Angels in America* among those works of art that are considered—perhaps dubiously—"universal."[26] L.C. Cole, writing for the liberal *New York Native*, surprisingly echoes similar sentiments in the more conservative *New Republic*:

> When was the last time we witnessed a playwright so aptly finding dramatic metaphors for such a host of social concerns? We're used to receiving well-intentioned harangues: This is exceptional imagery and use of character for larger purposes. Even AIDS, horrendous as it is, becomes something more emblematic, a symptom not only of collapsed individual immune systems, but of an invading corruption in our social and political institutions. (28)

In the Sunday *New York Times*, however, the most obvious canonization of *Angels in America* appears in a review that compares the play to an art form with a large amount of cultural capital: opera. In a column called "Classical View," Speight Jenkins takes

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[26] For two explorations of canon formation and its relation to the concept of "universal" art, see John Guillory's article "Canon" in Critical Terms for Literary Study and his book Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation.

leave of his normal duties as a classical music critic to consider *Angels in America*. Jenkins gushes that "the new Broadway sensation 'Angels in America' constantly suggests opera in its scope, its sweep and its intense but precisely controlled emotionalism" (2:25). Jenkins then goes on to compare Kushner to composers of extremely high cultural acclaim: Wagner, Verdi and Berlioz. In so doing, Jenkins' review places *Angels in America* in a category of "major art" that "dramatizes an epic subject: man's inhumanity to man... [and that] need not be narrowly defined" as drama only about AIDS or gay men. The positioning of this play furthers this sentiment. From the very title of the column, "Classical View," *Angels in America* is placed in the pantheon of "classical" art; similarly, the fact that Jenkins chose to review a play instead of his usual musical selections marks *Angels in America* as particularly notable. All told, this category of reviews erected a rhetorical frame of "high art" and "universality" around *Angels in America*, and this process helped guide spectators' horizon of expectations and instructed them that gay men were constituents of "universal" themes and dramas that comprise the human experience.

Several contemporaneous reviewers and columnists similarly greeted this embrace of *Angels* as a sign that acceptance of gay men was on the rise. Comprising the third category of reviews, these pieces lionize the play's politics, while insisting upon the production's artistic merit. "The time has come," effuses Anna Quindlen in a *New York Times* column, "You can feel it, in a hundred little ways year after year. It is so

certain and inevitable that the next century will be a time in which it is not simply safe, but commonplace, to be openly gay" (A21). Quindlin further exclaims that *Angels* "is a brilliant, brilliant play about love and the human condition and the time when our understanding about what it means to be human and loving has been, thankfully, expanded. The world spins forward. The time has come" (A21). While the bright future described by Quindlin has yet to be realized, there is still no denying that at the dawning of the twenty-first century, depictions of openly gay characters are more prevalent than in 1993. And, for that matter, it is notable that the *New York Times*, the supposed "paper of record" for the U.S., stated in 1993 that being "happy and gay" is "a commonplace part of the human condition" (Quindlen A21). Following this inclusive political reading of the play, John Heilpern, a writer for the liberal *New York Observer*, pinned his hopes on the production in a particularly remarkable fashion. In his review, Heilpern comments that *Angels in America* is "speaking to us of a murderous era as no other play within memory… Heralding what? Perhaps hope, or salvation, in this contemporary epic cradled in sorrow" ("Millennium Approaches" 26). Longing for "salvation" from the "muderous" 1980s, he additionally argues that *Angels* is art not propaganda: "Mr. Kushner," he writes, "is too witty to be preachy" ("Millennium Approaches" 26). Heilpern then continues to issue a surprisingly personal plea to Kushner:

> For some time, possibly a lifetime, I have been searching in vain for the new American drama of imaginative ideas, a form of magic realism transcending the bourgeois or the naturalism of movies. *Angels in America* is that landmark drama. It is, on the one hand, painfully concrete; on the other hand, it delights in the theater of magical images. ("Millennium Approaches" 26)

Heilpern is not the only critic hoping to be saved politically and dramaturgically by *Angels*; David Richards, writing in the Sunday *New York Times,* states that "what hangs in the balance is not just the fate of his major characters and a handful of lesser ones, but the very country itself, a deeply diseased kingdom [sic] suffering from the virulent self-interest of the Reagan years" ("Epic All Right" 2:1). This specifically refers to the fate of the country as it is envisioned within the fiction of the play, but, as the final paragraph of his review reveals, Richards is also talking about the country outside the play. "Having described the illness in 'Millennium Approaches,' does [Kushner] now have it in him to envision the cure? And if there is none, will the compassion of his art provide the solace we all crave?" (Richards "Epic All Right" 2:9). Like Heilpern, Richards desperately wants the play to give him "solace" from the "illness" of "virulent self-interest" and "the Reagan years." Each of these authors, in different ways, displays in these articles a hope that the production of *Angels in America* represents a new era in the acceptance of homosexuals. By suggesting that the production represents a radical shift in the acceptability of homosexuals in the U.S., these articles further the emergent ideology of gay civil rights.

Unlike those reviews that approached the play as political art, there remains a fourth category that gave primacy to the play's political implications. These reviews tend to lack the optimistic belief that *Angels in America* marked a new era in gay civil rights. Many suggest, instead, that the play brought difficult truths to light, such as the deadly effects of AIDS in the 1980s, the debate centered on gays in the military, and the continued prejudice endured by gay men. These reviews, moreover, insist that the play fails to offer any viable solution to these problems. A few critics even go so far as to argue that most of the play's characters are not "normal" due to their sexual orientation. Such sentiments seemingly contradict that argument that *Angels* solely brought inclusion and acceptance for gay men. Yet, since even these critics accepted *Angels in America's* artistic value, they implicitly worked to count homosexuals as worthy subjects of mainstream representation and consideration. Owing to the fraught nature of this category, separate in-depth considerations of these reviews seem appropriate.

David Hinckley's column in the *Daily News* argues that *Angels in America* discusses uncomfortable topics in the public sphere. Hinckley further posits that "sound bites and headlines" are "the closest brush most citizens get with Broadway or theatre in general;" and because of this trend, *Angels in America*, through its reviews and advertisements, circulates difficult ideas among the American public ("Mainstream" 53). Hinckley does not mention that his own column plays into this phenomenon, for he abets this dissemination of information when he states that *Angels* "revolves around a

graphic look at homosexuality in the age of AIDS" ("Mainstream" 53). "And," he suggests, "let's face it: just reading that phrase makes a lot of people squirm and turn away" ("Mainstream" 53). Acknowledging the sensitivity of the play's topic, Hinckley also comprehends the work's possible political limitations. Unlike critics Quindlen and Heilpern, who looked to the play for political salvation, Hinckley maintains that *Angel's* ability to inspire significant change is far more modest. The best Kushner and his play can hope to accomplish, Helipern reasons, is to raise awareness through its circulation of ideas.

Frank DeCaro, in his *Newsday* review, offers a similarly tempered reaction. Discussing the prejudice gay men endure, DeCaro suggests that *Angels* causes discomfort because to watch the production is life-changing. This experience, as DeCaro describes it, is similar to Dolan's description of utopian performatives for the play suggests that the world is "not-yet-set" and allows the utopian to "be felt as desire, or as concrete fantasy, in the space of performance" (Dolan *Utopia* 7). And this process, DeCaro continues, puts into circulation both an emergent ideology and the expectation that the play may significantly alter one's world view. He writes that through Harper's delusional journey to Antarctica, he saw his own:

> longing for a pristine world without AIDS and evil people on C-SPAN every day telling me my lifestyle is implicitly harmful… especially if I want to join the military. I saw a craving for a world as fresh-smelling as Pine-Sol and as enlivening as a York Peppermint Patty or a kiss from Larry Kramer… Art experiences like this don't happen every day, and it's

> probably better that they don't, because they shake you up, and you obsess over them, and you decide your vapid life will never be the same. (DeCaro 44)

The reference to the controversy over gays in the military is, for DeCaro, a personal attack; and *Angels* causes DeCaro such discomfort because its artistic vision resembles the vision of change—of the emergent ideology—that he hopes to see in the world beyond the theatre. Though he does not employ the terminology of Geertz, DeCaro seems so shocked because *Angels* possesses the ability to "bring a particular cast of mind" that he wishes for "into the world of objects" (Geertz 99). Readers of DeCaro's review would have been met by an ideology not likely seen on C-SPAN. And, likely, this article broadened its readers' horizon of expectations vis-a-vis *Angels*.

Alisa Solomon, writing in the *Village Voice,* reveals her unhappiness with the mainstream success of *Angels*, for it seems that while the play made the emergent ideology of gay civil rights more palatable to the mainstream, it rendered it less agreeable in her eyes. She begins by positing that thus far the reviews of *Angels in America* have described, "the queering of the Broadway theater. And, like the queering of the country's other quintessentially American enterprise—the military—it doesn't take much and it's making folks nervous" ("Whose Tommy?" 89). By this, Solomon, like DeCaro, alludes to the contemporaneous firestorm concerning gays in the military. She writes that the play elicits anxiety because "*Angels* doesn't plead for acceptance. It

doesn't dramatize how we're just like mainstream America. In fact, it offers a lot of compelling reasons for why we wouldn't want to be just like mainstream America" ("Whose Tommy?" 89). Here, Solomon explicitly disagrees that the gay characters in *Angels* are universal. Interestingly, she is one of the very few reviewers to articulate this position. While she attributes discomfort to the reviewers who are reporting on the "queering of Broadway theatre," her column also suggests *her* discomfort with the idea that queerness is "just like mainstream America." As a supporter of gay rights, it would seem that for Solomon, then, *Angels* is fundamentally dissatisfying because it fails to forward a sufficiently radical platform.

Michael Feingold, also writing for the *Village Voice,* argues that the play's politics cause discomfort because they go beyond foisting the positive attributes of the dominant culture onto a minority group; instead, they reveal the ambiguity of identity and the chaos inherent in socio-political order. "Though *Angels* is constructed like a classical double-plot play, and written in the naturalistic, jokey tone traditional on Broadway, it eschews 'normality,' implying that gay is no less normal than any other way of not-melting in our nonmelting pot" (218). It accomplishes this, he proposes, by using "blasphemy and gender subversion" in the humor and cross-gender casting which guarantees "that every notion advanced will also contain its opposite" (218). He puts forward that *Angels* does not "take an orderly stand on a specific set of issues"; instead, it "treats politics as a connected and conflicting set of impulses, a moral soup in

which we find ourselves swimming" (218). The representations of people and ideas in the play are not dogmatic diatribes because each representation possesses a basic instability. For example, paying attention to the ancient Jewish rabbi, played by a woman, who introduces *Millennium Approaches*, Feingold asserts that "the absurd casting (asked for in the script) implies, not that [the rabbi] is absurd, but that he and the actress are in some respects identical, that as Americans they share some indefinable essence" (218). To reinforce the point that this production presents a radical vision of who is included among the U.S. body politic, Feingold observes that "Jews, gays, Mormons, blacks—there aren't any 'real' Americans in *Angels* except Prior, just as there aren't any 'straight' white males except Joe" (218). This conclusion makes explicit that characters hailed by other reviewers as "universal" are frequently not considered "'real' Americans." And, yet, although Feingold labels Prior as "real" based upon his Anglo-Saxon heritage, Prior remains gay—a fact that would often exclude him from "real" American-ness. Likewise, Feingold calls Joe "straight," though Joe eventually admits to his homosexual desires (Kushner *Millennium Approaches* 75). Feingold's article implicitly considers the radical shift in the definitional conventions of American normalcy that was found among and articulated by the play's reviews. Because the play's characters defy easy categorization, the play eschews the type of "mastery" that comes from categorization—the heart of modernity in the eyes of Horkheimer and Adorno (18). In other words, the play does not state that gay people are "normal."

Instead, normality itself is redefined to contain new and more complex categories in which human beings are not defined by their sexuality alone.

On the opposite end of the political spectrum, Edwin Wilson's *Wall Street Journal* review of *Angels in America* suggests that the lack of "normal" characters in the play is cause for complaint (Wilson 213). Part of a small set of conservative reviews that accept the play's artistic merits but not its politics, Wilson's article maintains that: "Mr. Kushner is unquestionably a talented writer" who "in terms of pure theatre … has much to offer" (213,14). Yet, despite this praise, Wilson finds fault with other critics who claim homosexuals as "universal" subjects. "It is when we come to the second part of Mr. Kushner's subtitle—his claim that the play deals with 'national themes'—that the play has problems," Wilson exclaims (Wilson 214). "'Angels in America,'" he continues, represents the closed universe of a homosexual world: There is hardly a straight person in it who is normal" (Wilson 214). Wilson does not offer up his definition of normalcy, but, for him, it was not presented in this play. Far from being "universal" for Wilson, *Angels* focuses on small subpopulations. Does Wilson's understanding, therefore, negate the political effects Feingold saw in the play? Was the play actually able to redefine normality for anyone who did not already find the characters in this play "normal"? The *Christian Science Monitor* review helps resolve this question.

The *Christian Science Monitor* critic argues that *Angels* is "a harsh, shattering drama about futile struggles for love and power… but its homosexual themes may

eliminate it from some theatergoers' agendas" (Morehouse III 215). The review suggests that the play's themes are so far from "universal" that they may drive spectators away. While acknowledging that the text won the Pulitzer Prize, the review criticizes director George C. Wolfe for going "beyond what the script calls for in depicting sexual situations and nudity for their shock value. In several instances, Kushner's words would have been more moving if they were simply stated without embellishment" (Morehouse III 215). This review explicitly objects to representations of gay bodies and acts on Broadway that, in the opinion of the *Christian Science Monitor* critic, should not be part of staging this Pulitzer-winning script. The *Christian Science Monitor* review acknowledges the art of Kushner's text while objecting to mainstream representations of queer bodies. This review—like the one in the *Wall Street Journal*—nevertheless implicitly reports to its readers that there is a mainstream play on Broadway that considers the concerns of homosexuals to be part of "national themes." Much like when *The Christian Science Monitor* reported on HIV/AIDS for the first time in its review of *The Normal Heart*, the reviews in the *Wall Street Journal* and the *Christian Science Monitor* carry the play's ideology outside the theatre. In this case, *Angels in America*'s emergent ideology that gays should be citizens was brought to readers who might not otherwise hear such ideas. This may not have radically shifted ideas of normalcy as Feingold argues, but it carried this emergent ideology into mainstream newspapers that otherwise were not likely to be sympathetic to the play's messege. The reviews may not

have changed minds, but they arguably increased awareness and made the emergent ideology more visible.

Howard Kissel, writing for the *Daily News,* differentiates the play's artistic merits from its political message when he writes, "Two things are happening on the stage of the Walter Kerr, one theatrical, the other political. The latter overshadows the former" (216). His review is similar to that of the *Wall Street Journal*'s for it bemoans the play's lack of "normal" characters. Despite this, Kissel vouches for the production's artistic worth, writing "Kushner is one of the most original writers the theater has had in a long time, one with genuine intelligence and theatrical imagination" (216). With this, Kissel positions the production as "art": as a piece that stands as worthy of mainstream attention. Expectedly, Kissel's admiration is far from whole-hearted, for he maintains: "The theatre has always been a gay province, but in recent years its creative people, rather than sublimating their concerns, have used the theater as a pulpit to affirm their identity and their grievances. As pulpits go, 'Angels in America' is St. Patrick's" (216). Kissel, therefore, deems it acceptable for gay people to make theatre as long as they do not explicitly mention their sexuality. One of the few instances in which *Angels* is explicitly referred to as preaching, the article does not go so far as to label the play propaganda. Nevertheless, Kissel's review is one of the very few that suggests that homosexuals ought to continue "sublimating their concerns" and keep quiet. Yet, proclaiming the theatre as gay, Kissel unwittingly points to a potential haven for gay

life. And Kissel's review, moreover, helps "affirm [gay people's] identity and their grievances" through its consideration of homosexuals previously "sublimated" existence (216). Reviews such as Kissel's—ones that disagree with the play's politics but embrace its art—circulated the play's emergent ideology and affirmed Kushner's artistic talent.

The one critic who refused to recognize *Angels in America's* artistic value and who panned its political message was Yale Kramer. In a long article written for the *American Spectator* and excerpted for *Newsday*, Kramer laments the play's politics and art. The *Newsday* excerpt, "Clipping the Wings of 'Angels,'" drives to the heart of his critique and argues that "*Angels in America* lacks the prerequisite for greatness—the transformation of universal experience into art—and what it substitutes for universal experience is messages. It is a propaganda play, and likely to become as dated as Odets" (Y. Kramer "Clipping" 102). In greater detail, the *American Spectator* article explains: "Although the play is not profound, it is understandable that audiences find it dazzling. It was meant to leave the audience bewildered, to make us feel, at the end of it, like dumb hicks—straight, three-piece-suited, permanent-waved goyim" (Y. Kramer "Angels on Broadway" 2). Though no other reviewer mentions finding the play confusing, Kramer continues, "Contributing to the confusion is the gratuitous and unexplained androgyny [by which he means the cross-gender casting] … and the excessive length that prolongs the evening well past 11:30 (by which time our critical

faculties have long since gone to bed)" (Y. Kramer "Angels on Broadway" 2). For Kramer, the cross-casting was neither fun nor politically interesting, and his critique concerning the play's length suggests that time did not pass quickly for him. In his description of an incident in Greenwich Village, Kramer reveals the rationale behind some of his reactions:

> On the evening of Good Friday, a few steps from the Perry Street Theatre in Greenwich Village where *The Night Larry Kramer Kissed Me* is playing, you could see in the window of a gay sex shop a male mannequin wearing a pair of bulging jockey shorts and holding in one hand a couple of carrots and in the other a tube of K-Y jelly and a box of condoms. The sign above him read: "Happy Easter. Be Bad. But be safe." In front of the theater itself a sign announced: "Thursday night is singles night. Yes I'm available. Maybe, let's talk. Sorry, I'm taken. Ask for your 'signal tag' at the ticket booth." Next to each choice on the sign was a colored circular adhesive "signal tag"—green for "Yes," yellow for "Maybe," red for "Sorry." It was as though life and art had become indistinguishable. (Y. Kramer "Angels on Broadway" 23)

This passage is surprising for it appears at first glance to have little to do with the play. What it reveals about Yale Kramer's relationship to *Angels*, though, is his fear concerning homosexuality: "It was as though life and art had become indistinguishable" (Y. Kramer "Angels on Broadway" 23). The fact that he finds gays in "life" more distasteful than gays in "art" suggests that for Yale Kramer gays are tolerable onstage but not off. This, perhaps, has largely to do with his definition of gay people; Kramer states: "Despite the popular view of male homosexuality, sexual

orientation is not the only socially relevant issue, or perhaps even the most important one. 'Badness' is—or rather transgression" (Y. Kramer "Angels on Broadway" 24). By defining male homosexuality as a moral failing rather than as a "sexual orientation," Yale Kramer suggests that "badness" is acceptable onstage but not in everyday life. He promotes a carefully maintained segregation between gays and straights and dismisses *Angels in America*: "[Kushner] rejects as unacceptable the view that it is possible for gays and straights to live together peacefully if gays exercise more self-restraint and straights exercise more tolerance" (Y. Kramer "Angels on Broadway" 24). It is, therefore, safe to conclude that Yale Kramer ultimately wants gays to stay in the closet.

The reasons for analyzing Yale Kramer's article on *Angels* in such detail are twofold. First, it is the only review that rejects the play, both artistically and politically. Second, it juxtaposes nicely against those reviews that accepted the play's artistic merits but rejected its political values. Reading the reviews of *The Wall Street Journal* and *The Christian Science Monitor* in contrast to Kramer's piece, one gains a greater understanding of how the former set implicitly accepted homosexuality into the mainstream. Unlike these reviews, which carved a niche for gay men in the artistic realm, Kramer's piece argues that gays who refuse to be closeted do not deserve a place in mainstream society—artistic or otherwise. If Geertz is right that art represents ideas in the material world, then creating a representation onstage of acceptable gay behavior

helps make openly gay men's existence in the mainstream more thinkable.[27] This, apparently, is a phenomenon that Kramer would view as best avoided.

When *Perestroika*, the second part of *Angels in America*, opened on Broadway in November 1993, new reviews were scarce but mainly positive. Largely focusing on how *Perestroika* lived up to critical expectations, many mentioned the optimism and uplift of the play's conclusion; some even evoked religious terminology in their descriptions of the final speech, proclaiming it a "benediction" (Rich "Healing" C20). All told, there were few negative reviews among this batch, and those that did emerge tended to register on two levels. While some complained that the play's politics did not sufficiently extend beyond the theatre, others inisted that the final "benediction" was bestowed upon an undeserving audience who, no matter how liberal, played a complicit role in Reagan's presidency.

In general, the reviews of *Perestroika*, like the one in *Variety*, operated in accordance with a very simple formula. They begin by posing the question "will playwright Tony Kushner equal the astonishing dramatic accomplishment of 'Millennium'?" They continue by answering with "an unqualified yes" (Gerard "Two 'Angels'" 33). Several reviews applaud the second part's hope and charity. David Richards, writing for the *Sunday New York Times*, notes:

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[27] I write "openly gay men" because *Angels* contains no openly homosexual women.

> Without caving in to sentimentality or altering what has always been a sober prognosis for the future, the playwright has been able to find hope in his chronicle of the poisonous 1980s—something I wouldn't have thought likely after the first part. It may amount to no more than the acknowledgement that we are all in this grim mess together. But the uplift is real and salutary. Mr. Kushner even extends his charity to the work's archfiend, the lawyer Roy Cohn. ("Poignant" 2:1)

Frank Rich echoes these sentiments in his *New York Times* review: "'Perestroika' is aptly titled not because it has much to do with the former Soviet Union but because it burrows into that historical moment of change when all the old orders, from Communism to Reaganism, are splintering, and no one knows what apocalypse or paradise the next millennium might bring… Not the least of Mr. Kushner's many achievements is his refusal to adhere to any theatrical or political theory" ("Healing" C11). After praising the play's non-dogmatism, Rich describes the end of the play, claiming that Prior's final wave to the audience "feels less like a goodbye than a benediction" ("Healing" C20). Heilpern, in the *New York Observer*, also takes up religious rhetoric when describing *Perestroika* and states that the production takes "the ravaged Prior from terrible fear, and even cowardice, to graceful understanding and courage, in the time he has left on earth. That's a kind of miracle! And, let it be shouted from the rooftops, this is a miraculous production" ("*Perestroika*" 34). It would seem, therefore, that the authors of these reviews found the solace, hope and grace in *Angels in America* that they both anticipated and craved.

The few articles that object to *Perestroika* are surprisingly from sources that had previously supported part one's thesis concerning the need for gay men's acceptance into the mainstream. Writing for the *Daily News*, David Hinckley praises Kushner's efforts to reach "for Shakespearean levels of metaphor" to explore AIDS and to promote a liberal attitude towards the disease ("*Perestroika*" 47). "That's why," Hinckley explains, "Kushner has been hailed, and one begrudges him none of his success, but in an age when TV and radio have already reduced theater's influence, it's too bad 'Angels in America' could not deliver more of its message outside the walls of the church" ("*Perestroika*" 47). This line seems strange coming from the man who, when *Millennium Approaches* opened, wrote how the production's publicity (including his own column) would transmit the play's messages concerning AIDS and the Reagan years beyond the theatre. But, even if Hinckley began to doubt the ability of theatre to successfully influence society, he praises the play, comparing it favorably to the Western world's preeminent dramatist. This comparison to Shakespeare implicitly continued the play's acceptance into the Western canon.

A negative reaction to *Perestroika* came from *Village Voice* critic Michael Musto, who, despite his condemnations, went the farthest in treating all of the play's characters as citizens. Beyond disliking Prior and Harper's "many hallucinations," Musto mentions that he "also found it off-putting that, after all the play's understandable rancor and bitterness, Kushner's lead character placates us by saying, 'You're all

fabulous creatures!' Excuse me, but aren't *we* the ones that ushered in the Reagan era and all the subsequent plagues, sat on our fat asses in the midst of doom, and are now plotzing down again to commiserate with a pricey play about it?" (46). Musto has no interest in Prior's blessing; drawn, instead, to "rancor and bitterness," and, most of all, guilt, Musto argues that neither the characters nor the spectators are "fabulous creatures," for they, as United States citizens, are to blame for Reagan his presidency. Implicitly, then, Musto's review suggests that the inclusive "we" at the end of the play refers to the citizens who either brought Reagan to power or who silently accepted his regime. Thus, for Musto, the play's victims, because of their roles in the American Democratic process, share in the blame.

Regardless of their like or dislike of Parts I and II of the play, the reviewers suggest that the production forwarded the ideological premise that gay men should be included as part of the U.S. citizenry. However, analyzing the reviews of a production reveals critical reaction to a piece of theatre, not the content of the production itself.[28] Therefore, the production itself requires examination before any claims about ideological content can be made. If the production's ideology did, in fact, argue for the inclusion of gay men as U.S. citizens, then the production's acceptance by the mainstream interpellated a Broadway audience. But who was that Broadway audience?

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[28] This was seen when the reviews of *Homebody/Kabul* suggested that the play was a critique of the Bush administration's foreign policy, but an analysis of the production itself did not bear out that finding.

Susan Bennett, discussing the sociological composition of theatre audiences, maintains that "the mainstream theatre addresses an audience which is white, male, middle class, and heterosexual;" she further explains that "the predominant determining factor [in mainstream American theatre audiences is] education" (89, 88). Though no empirical evidence, such as audience surveys, remains from the *Angels* Broadway premiere, it seems possible the production's audience was more heterogeneous than the ones of Bennett's studies. First, the studies Bennett cites date mainly from the late-1970s; given the dramatic increase in productions with "gay themes" after *As Is* and *The Normal Heart* in 1985 (Paller 235) and given *Angels*' explicitly "gay" subject matter—as evidenced from its subtitle, "A Gay Fantasia on National Themes"—it seems certain that the *Angels* audience was not entirely "heterosexual" (Bennett 89). Second, while Bennett's conclusions also suggest that the majority of the spectators remained "white, male, [and] middle class," it is important to note that *Angels* became Broadway's most widely discussed play in recent history. Its tickets were among the most desirable in New York City. Spectators, therefore, would likely include members of the New York's theatre scene, as well as tourists interested in the "hot, new" Broadway play. It is also probable that that local elites desiring, in the words of Kushner's Roy Cohn, to see "something, anything hard to get" also comprised a portion of the audience (*Millennium Approaches* 12). Finally, if Bennett is correct that education level is the primary variable determining the composition of mainstream audiences,

then surely this production counted students and teachers among its spectators. This is rendered even more likely by the play's literary accolades and by its reduced fares for Wednesday matinees and day-of tickets. If the production sought to support gay civil rights, then this relatively heterogeneous group of spectators were interpellated by a mainstream play that suggested that gays should be included in the nation as citizens.

Imagining New Citizens Into A Nation

David Savran's writing on *Angels in America* stands among the most influential and incisive. Yet, this discussion takes exception with many Savran's conclusions. First, contrary to Savran's findings, I maintain the play's complex treatment of identity politics minimizes the play's potential fault in its neglect of class, for Kushner elegantly shows how no single variable is constitutive of identity. Second, I argue that the play's ability to tread the middle ground between radical and conventional stands as one of its great accomplishments. Instead of approaching the play as somehow "impure," neither radical nor conventional, I argue with John Bull and maintain that the "mainstream" serves as the interlocutor between emergent and dominant ideologies. Because of this, it was absolutely necessary for *Angels* to be considered mainstream privilege in order for it to help re-imagine its characters—mainly gay men—as full citizens of the United States. Finally, Savran calls for a reading of the play that is grounded in a material location, but his own analysis of the script does not take into account any particular production. By examining the Broadway premiere utilizing materialist semiotics, one

can show how the production supported the emergent ideology of gay civil rights. While acknowledging the rigorous thought and astute observations made by Savran, this chapter uses his work as a foundation for significantly different findings.

Savran's analysis of *Angels* employs the theories of Bourdieu to understand the swiftness with which *Angels* was canonized ("Ambivalence" 14). Savran argues that "the play's content is the result more of its location in the cultural hierarchy than of Tony Kushner's ideological predispositions" (*Queer Materialism* x). In other words, *Angels in America*'s cultural location—its position on Broadway, its much-heralded success, its Pulitzer Prize, its acceptance as art—more significantly determined the play's meaning than did the intentions of Kushner. To hold otherwise, in Savran's estimation, is to fall victim to "the intentional fallacy"— the belief that an artist's intentions matter more than or as much as his or her works cultural location (*Queer Materialism* x). Savran writes: "[T]he play's ambivalence (its way of being, in Eve Sedgwick's memorable phrase, 'kinda subversive, kinda hegemonic') is finally less a question of authorial intention than of the peculiar cultural and economic position of this play (and its writer) in relation to the theater, theater artists, and the theatergoing public in the United States" ("Ambivalence" 32).

Despite his insistence that a work's cultural location trumps its content, Savran devotes much energy toward analyzing the written text of *Angels in America*. This he ironically does without investigating a single performance context. Savran's close

reading of *Angels* focuses on the play's political ambivalence, which is embodied "in the person of Louis." Through this reading, Savran argues that Louis is "after all, constructed as the most empathetic character in the play" (Savran "Ambivalence" 31). Savran makes this claim to show that Louis' deeply held belief in democracy and liberal humanism is at the heart of the play's politics. Savran, however, gives no evidence as to why he considers Louis the most empathetic character. At best, this is a very dubious claim if one considers that Louis is the character who abandons his sick partner, who begins a new relationship almost immediately, and who fails to listen to Belize due to his own self-absorption ("You never bothered to ask," Belize says when Louis is surprised to learn that Belize has a lover [Kushner *Perestroika* 94]). Louis, moreover, is the one to whom ultimately even his partner, Prior, says, "You can't come back. Not ever" (Kushner *Perestroika* 140), a point in the production that shows Prior as the victim of Louis' selfishness. All told, these moments make Savran's claim that Louis is the "most empathetic character in the play" suspect (Savran "Ambivalence" 31). More importantly, this play is not constructed to focus empathetically on any single character. Instead, it follows the Brechtian injunction concerning epic theatre, which argues against letting "spectators off the hook by allowing too much psychological investment in particular characters" (Reinelt 236). There are so many characters in Kushner's epic and each of them has such a strong arc that it is difficult to feel particularly empathetic with any *one* of them. Instead, the viewer is intended to feel empathetic with *all* of them.

This is part of the political work of the play: to suggest the necessity of community rather than of self-serving individualism. One can see this in the community formed at the end of the play (Prior, Louis, Belize and Hannah) that replaces both the romantic unions and the nuclear family—the antiquated relationships that will not survive the pressures of the new millennium.

While *Angels* elides class distinctions and remains silent on the Marxist revolution (points Savran criticizes), there is another, pressing political goal to be found in the play: inclusion and citizenship for gay men. Prior's final proclamation that gays will be citizens found its counterpart in the contemporaneous political discourse. As the analysis of the reviews clearly suggests, critics believed that the acceptance and popularity of *Angels* mirrored mainstream support for the reception of homosexuals into the national community. The play goes to great lengths to discuss the nature of the inclusion. For example, when Hannah, the conservative Mormon, sit in Prior's hospital room she chastises Prior, the liberal gay man, for making assumptions about her and suggests that Prior cannot "Imagine. The things in my head. [sic] You don't make assumptions about me, mister; I won't make them about you" (*Perestroika* 102). Some might see this statement as a mundane call against stereotypical assumptions, but it must be remembered that the play puts this statement into the mouth of a conservative Mormon woman challenging a gay man's liberal views. Such a move is surprising in such a liberal piece. Yet it works precisely because it speaks to both sides concerning

the limits of their imaginations. Furthering this point, Hannah scolds Prior for his lack of imagination; she states, "An angel is just a belief, with wings and arms that can carry you. It's naught to be afraid of. If it lets you down, reject it. Seek for something new" (*Perestroika* 103). In this play, the Angel seeks stasis and Prior rejects it. Prior's action is the quintessential gesture of the play: it finds the current imagination of the U.S. to be stagnant and it reimagines the nation as a place where all its characters can be citizens. The fact that this play's characters are, with few exceptions, white and middle-class limits the inclusive vision. Yet its inclusion of gay men, in particular is, nevertheless, visionary. While the play may not forward the Marxist revolution, it does argue that equal citizenship, regardless of sexual orientation, is a valid and powerful political goal.

Savran's argument continues by positing that *Angels* captured the popular imagination—despite its portrayal of gay men as "normal"—because of the play's "skill in both reactivating a sense (derived from the early nineteenth [sic] century) of America as the utopian nation and mobilizing the principle of ambivalence—or, more exactly, dissensus—to produce a vision of a once and future pluralist culture" (Savran "Ambivalence" 33). By ambivalence, Savran means the presence of two opposing ideas, like those found in Feingold's review—the one that discussed the cross-gender casting of characters implying "that every notion advanced will also contain its opposite" (218). Likewise, by dissensus, Savran means a violent disagreement in which ideas exist in a single culture in productive opposition to form a "pluralist culture" (Savran

"Ambivalence" 33). Savran argues that both ambivalence and dissensus are too limited to actually create a truly pluralist culture. For Savran, the play's attempt to create a pluralist society using dissensus does not radically challenge the contemporaneous imagination of the U.S. because it reverts to a nineteenth-century ideal. Savran suggests that the only way to radically challenge the contemporaneous imagination of the U.S. is through the type of Marxist analysis that *Angels* lacks. Therefore, for Savran, the play fails to support an emergent ideology. Instead, it props up a residual ideology, at best; and, at worst, it upholds the dominant one.

While *Angels* neglects to address class as a category of analysis, the play remains in conversation with Marxist thought. Concluding the drama with a communitarian view of utopia rather than an individualistic one, Kushner pushes toward the Marxian ideal. Through its embrace of ambiguity and its use ideological dialectics, the play further reveals its debts to the Frankfurt School and Walter Benjamin, some of the most influential Marxist thinkers of the twentieth century. In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Frankfurt school theorists Horkheimer and Adorno suggest that a proper dialectic "discloses each image as script. It teaches us to read from its features the admission of falseness which cancels its power and hands it over to truth" (18). *Angels In America* is dialectical in this sense for each of the play's ideas contains its antithesis. This is made readily apparent in the double casting, where, for example, a woman actress as an ancient rabbi "features the admission of falseness," thereby canceling the image's

"power" while handing "it over to truth" (Horkheimer and Adorno 18). Rather than attempting to find an ideological synthesis, the play endorses dissensus and constant movement as admirable goals. While this is a rejection of Marx's argument for a historical end point, it follows a strain of Marxist thought found in the Frankfurt School. When the Angel of the play tells Prior that humanity "MUST STOP MOVING!" (Kushner *Perestroika* 44), Prior replies that "progress, migration, motion is… modernity" (Kushner *Perestroika* 130). Horkheimer and Adorno maintain that the authoritarian drive to "master" is partially at the root of modernity's tragedies. They further contend that the "Enlightenment, understood in the widest sense as the advance of thought, has always aimed at liberating human beings from fear and installing them as masters" (1). The play resists this type of mastery; likewise, it resists facile categorization through its refusal to reduce its characters to simple traits. The play's double casting further works to undercut this stability. Only one aspect of the play argues for any sort of mastery and that voice emanates from Roy Cohn. Cohn, the plays' villain, presents a world view in direct opposition to that of the play. Kushner includes Cohn and his ultra-conservative ideology for the sake of dissensus; indeed, Cohn and those of his ilk are needed to fuel the ideological struggle necessary for modernity's animation. Although *Angels* contains a Cohnian character, the play argues against the idea of "mastery" and supports the sentiment that is at the heart of the *Dialectics of Enlightenment*. The fact that this commercial play deploys the same rhetoric that Horkheimer and Adorno

marshaled in their critique of "the culture industry" is surely ironic, but it does not negate the fact that the play mobilizes their critique.

Savran, however, argues that the play's position as a "classic" cultural artifact in the "culture industry" is precisely what negates its ability to marshall Adorno and Horkheimer's ideas. Savran bases his conclusion on the idea that "like our 'classic texts' … *Angels* has a way of conceptualizing utopia so that it may be adopted by 'the dominant culture… for its purposes… Utopianism has served… to diffuse or deflect dissent, or actually to transmute it into a vehicle of socialization'" (Savran "Ambivalence" 32). There is little doubt that *Angels* was almost immediately dubbed a "classic text." Likewise, the dominant culture—represented, here, by the mainstream reviews, but not cited by any material evidence in Savran's essay—"adopted" *Angels* "for its purposes." Perhaps, as Savran suggests, these reviews and the remainder of the dominant culture accepted *Angels* into the realm of "classic texts" in order "to transmute" any potential dissent "into a vehicle of socialization" (Savran "Ambivalence" 32).

John Bull, however, argues that mainstream theatre can help the dominant ideology accept an emergent ideology by rendering the emergent ideology more accessible. If this is true, then the question becomes: What socialization occurred because of Kushner's utopian vision? Did the socialization negate the politics of gay citizenship that seem to be part of the play? Because Savran does not analyze any

production in particular, he cannot answer this question. He argues that Bourdieu's understandings of cultural location are more important than the performance text itself, but Savran does not examine a specific performance context. Therefore, while he very astutely notes that when society canonizes a text, society turns that text "into a vehicle of socialization," he does not ask the following question: What socialization occurred because of the Broadway premiere of *Angels in America*? In the Althusserian terms used in earlier chapters, Savran does not ask how the production interpellated its spectators and the readers of the production's reviews.

The reviews of the Broadway premiere declared *Angels* a "classic." In so doing, these reviews placed the play's depiction of gay men at the center of the "universal" concept of the U.S. nation. Calling it universal implicitly or explicitly included gay men in the "nation" in Benedict Anderson's sense of nation as "an imagined political community, … imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign" (Anderson 6). This is a formulation of "nation" that Savran also invokes. The plot of *Angels* includes gay men in the "nation" quite literally by imagining gay men at the center of the national political community—from Roy Cohn's political acumen to the centrality of gay characters in the script. While some reviews resisted a play that imagined gay men as citizens (e.g., the *Wall Street Journal*, the *Christian Science Monitor*, and the *Daily News*), and some celebrated what they perceived as the play's politics (the *New York Observer* and *The Village Voice*), almost every review agreed that the play was "art" and, in so

doing, implicitly supported *Angels*' message that gay men should be thought of as fully citizens.

Savran's analysis of the text supports the reviews' reading of the politics of the play. Savran admits that "although I am tempted to see the celebrity of *Angels in America* as yet another measure of the power of liberal pluralism to neutralize oppositional practices, the play's success also suggests a willingness to recognize the contributions of gay men to American culture and to American literature in particular" ("Ambivalence" 34). But, again, rather than analyzing any material evidence of the play's "celebrity," such as its reviews, he simply performs a close-reading of the text. He writes that "by including Cohn and speaking about his surrogate fathers J. Edgar Hoover and Joseph McCarthy, the play demonstrates the always already queer status of American politics and, most proactively, of those generals of the Cold War (and American imperialism) who were most assiduous in their denunciation of political and sexual dissidence" ("Ambivalence" 35). Furthermore, Savran argues that within Kushner's portrayal, "it is not homosexuality that is pathological but, rather, its *denial*. Flagrantly uncloseted, the play provides a devastating critique of the closeted gay man in two medicalized bodies: Roy Cohn and Joe Pitt" ("Ambivalence" 35). Savran's close-reading of the text admits that the play's success "recognizes" gay men and their contributions to America. His reading further shows how Kushner critiques being "in the closet" rather than being "flagrantly uncloseted."

Looking at the reviews of this *particular* production there is evidence of how radically the Broadway premiere of *Angels* rhetorically and symbolically shifted who was included in the nation's "imagined community." This is more of an assimilationist tactic then an "oppositional" one, but that does not change the fact that this play radically challenged the idea of "the United States" to include gay men as universal, mainstream figures. *Angels in America* on Broadway helped assimilate the emergent ideology that gays should be full citizens into the dominant ideology. One might be tempted to argue that the Broadway premiere simply preached to the converted, a dismissal often given to any potential political impact that theatre might have, but that is not true in this the case. Beyond the speculated composition of the relatively heterogeneous audiences for the Broadway premiere of *Angels*, reviews of the play report a variety of reactions from standing ovations (Lahr) to "boos" (Winer). The reviews themselves suggest that the play's politics were to blame for the mixed reactions, which implies a politically heterogeneous audience, not an auditorium of the "converted." Likewise, the national media coverage brought the play's themes to a varied audience, from the conservative *Wall Street Journal* readership to the more liberal *New York Times* or *New Yorker* readership.

Another aspect of the Broadway performance text that may have contributed to its popular success—and hence its support of an emergent ideology—is its *mise-en-scène*. The script has Brechtian possibilities that the Broadway premiere resisted, and therefore

alienation was minimized and audience absorption was maximized. Even so, moments of alienation were recorded by critics. Frank Rich writes: "Mr. Kushner has not revised the text since [President Clinton's election]—a crony of Cohn still boasts of a Republican lock on the White House until the year 2000—but the shift in Washington has had the subliminal effect of making 'Angels in America' seem more focused on what happens next than on the past" ("Embracing" C16). The line of Cohn's crony likely brought spectators out of the fictional realm of the production and into the realm of their own lives, for a moment being aware of both. But these fleeting moments in the course of a six hour production probably did little to remove the audience from the absorption that director George C. Wolfe desired.

Wolfe's direction emphasized universality by eliminating some Brechtian elements. In particular, Wolfe's handling of the simultaneous staging reduced the possibilities for alienation. As Janelle Reinelt writes, the Broadway and a later San Francisco production had very different stagings of the simultaneous scenes scattered throughout the script. She writes that "in the New York production Wolfe staged the 'split screen' scenes in *Millennium* as simultaneous but discretely separate scenes in stable space. [San Francisco director] Wing-Davey reframed these scenes as interconnected and uncontainable (actors 'violated' one another's stage space to produce this effect of overflowing boundaries)" (239). Wolfe's more "realistic" staging was more in line with mainstream entertainment (like movies or television, for instance,

which use “split screens” semi-regularly), and perhaps this made the Broadway production more palatable and contributed to its success. Reinelt posits as much when looking at a sentence in a review of the Broadway premiere which reads in full: “For all the political rage and the scathing unsanitized horror, the hours zip by with the breezy enjoyment of a great page-turner or a popcorn movie” (Winer 210). About this sentence, Reinelt writes, “It is not the popular culture comparisons to popcorn movies that chill… it is the notion that a good night out in the theatre dishes up politics and genuinely horrible insights in order to accommodate them to the culinary tastes of an audience for whom these things must be rendered palatable” (238). The idea of a play discussing politics and “horrible insights” while being “rendered palatable” may “chill” Reinelt, but it is exactly what is necessary in order for a mainstream play to support an emergent ideology. The fact that *Angels in America* was able to use mainstream theatre to do so should not “chill”; it should make one celebrate. While there are a few reviews of the Broadway premiere which criticize Wolfe’s slick direction, there are many, many more that compliment it (Cole; Gerard "Angels"; Heilpern "Millennium Approaches"; Heilpern "*Perestroika*"; Kroll; Lahr; Morehouse III; Rich "Embracing"; Rich "Healing"; Richards "Epic All Right"; Sheward; Simon; Watt; Winer)**.** Wolfe’s more realistic directing, then, may not meet the Brechtian taste of some—and may hinder some of the radical potential of the text by rendering it “palatable”—but the realism also contributed to reviewers calling the play “universal.” The realist tradition is the closest

the U.S. has to a "normative" theatrical style. And labeling the play "universal" was extremely important for including gay men inside the imaginative space of the nation. The directing style of Wolfe, then, not only helped make the formal aspects of the play palatable; it also contributed to the emergent ideology the play contained becoming palatable.

The political work of the Broadway premiere of *Angels in America* was done from a position of extreme commercial and cultural success. Its record-high ticket prices, for-profit merchandise, prizes and reviews that framed it as "art" rather than "propaganda" all contributed to its cultural position. This position probably did not produce many activists or even move people to much political action outside the theatre. Perhaps if the text's Brechtian elements had been capitalized on or if the play made any mention of class in its identity politics, it could have been more of an "activist" or "Marxist" play. These aspects can and have been justifiably criticized (Reinelt; Savran "Ambivalence"). But those same qualities that some academics criticize also helped make the play "palatable" to the mainstream, and that helped reviewers see the play as art rather than propaganda. Because the production was framed as important art by the reviewers, it was framed as "universal" in its themes. This "universality" included homosexuals—sometimes implicitly, sometimes explicitly—in the "imagined community" of the United States. The production did political work not in spite of its cultural position but rather because of it. Through its performance text, its

mainstream cultural position, and the mainstream discourse surrounding it (predominantly the reviews), *Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes* imagined its characters—particularly its gay men—into the nation's conception of itself.

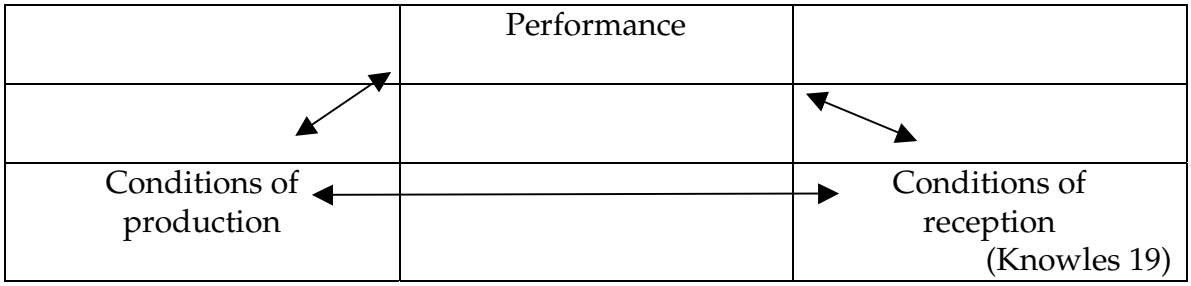
Chapter Five
Conclusion:
Mainstream Theatre Supporting Emergent Ideologies

Using materialist semiotics to analyze these three case studies reveals that mainstream theatre productions, albeit a part of the culture industry, are capable of supporting emergent ideologies by encouraging their assimilation into the dominant ideology. While this process almost always renders the emergent ideologies less radical, it nevertheless shifts the dominant ideology. In the case of *The Normal Heart*, the emergent ideology—one that identified AIDS as an important epidemic requiring immediate action from citizens and governmental organizations—was quickly incorporated into the mainstream media, helping to make these ideas part of the dominant ideology. *Angels in America,* framed as high art by its position on Broadway, its prizes, and its reviews, was able to argue that gay men deserved citizenship and to be accepted into the political mainstream. These theses, moreover, could not have been successfully advanced by the production without its positioning within the culture industry. The emergent ideology that critiqued the Bush administration's foreign policy in 2001 that surrounded the New York Theatre Workshop production of *Homebody/Kabul*, however, was not assimilated into the dominant ideology. This is largely due to the fact that the play was written before the events it supposedly criticized. The reviews of the production nevertheless contributed to the idea that there

were citizens of the United States who were not part of President Bush's supposed unity in the "war on terror," and the production itself allowed spectators and actors to come together to form a public ritual of mourning. The inclusion of *Homebody/Kabul* as a case study is, in part, as a counter-example. It serves as a case study that did not succeed in supporting an emergent ideology even though the prolific media discourse surrounding it argued adamantly that the production supported an emergent ideology. *Homebody/Kabul* was included, moreover, because its media coverage was so extensive and ideologically extreme. This made the reviews perfect data to explore the dissertation's methodology of materialist semiotics, which has implications beyond this work. Using materialist semiotics as a methodology illuminates a new way of viewing the relationship between the spectator and the performance.

Materialist semiotics concentrates on all facets of a particular production rather than looking solely at a dramatic text; in particular, materialist semiotics provides a method of analysis remarkably suited to examining the discourse that surrounds a production, such as reviews and advertising. It is through this material evidence of spectator reactions that this dissertation provides new insight into how mainstream theatre contributes to the assimilation of emergent ideologies into the dominant one. Examining a specific production rather than a printed script allows the scholar to speculate on spectators' potential horizon of expectations based on the conditions of production and reception. Understanding that spectators enter a theatre with

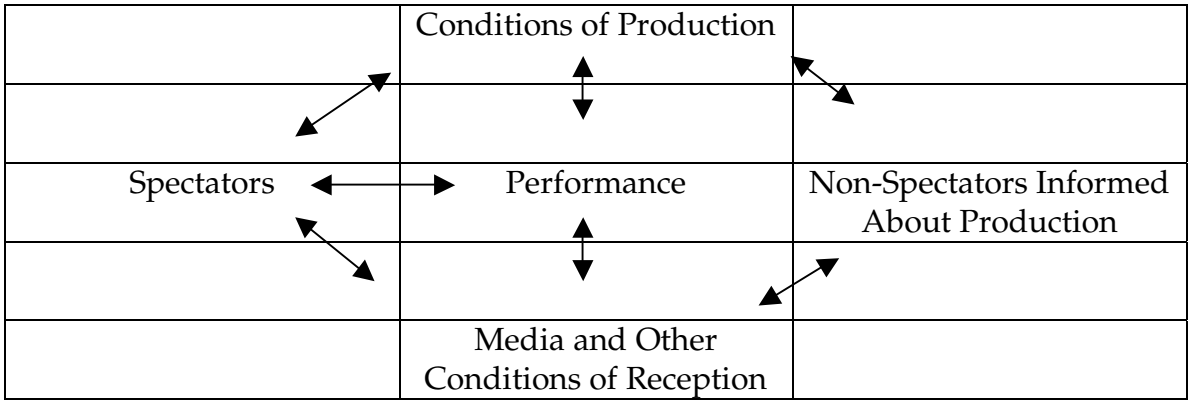
expectations that influence their decoding of the performance text argues against any notion that spectators are merely sponges absorbing the ideological implications of the performance; instead, spectators are active participants in that meaning-making. Spectators' participation in the meaning-making goes beyond a simple dialogue between spectator and performance text. The conditions of production (like the historical moment) influence the performance itself and the first spectators who see the play. Once reviews come out (a large part of the conditions of reception), the media's reaction to the play influences future spectators and even people who will never see the performance. Other aspects of the conditions of reception (such as the venue, the neighborhood, and the availability of tickets) also inform the spectators' relationship to the performance. When Ric Knowles diagrammed the relationship implied by materialist semiotics between spectator, performance, and conditions of production, he created a triangle:



(Knowles 19)

However, Knowles cautions against using this diagram as a template because "'meaning' in a given performance situation—the social and cultural work done by the performance, its performativity, and its force—is the effect of all of these systems and

each pole of the interpretative triangle working dynamically and relationally together" (19). My intervention, here, is to create a diamond of interpretative forces around the central performance, including both spectators and non-spectators informed about the production through its surrounding media discourse, particularly reviews:



Spectators are influenced before and after they see the performance by the conditions of production (such as the historical moment) and the conditions of reception (particularly the media reviews and advertising). These elements create a horizon of expectations for spectators before the performance that weighs upon their decoding of the performance; the conditions of production and reception also sway spectators' thoughts about the performance after watching it. The arrows go in both directions in my diagram because this relationship relies on the theories of the reader response school (e.g., Stuart Hall) to suggest that spectators and readers contribute to the meaning-making process; the performance and media coverage do not merely impose their meaning on spectators and readers. Instead, the performance and media coverage is decoded by spectators and

readers who have some flexibility in how they decode the text. The content of the performance and media reactions do matter, however; while the spectator and reader have the ability to interpret performances and reviews, spectators are nevertheless interpellated by those same texts. A similar process occurs between non-spectators who nevertheless read reviews of the performance or see advertising for it.

The multi-faceted relationship between spectators, the performance, and people who have not seen the production but who have read or heard about it influences public discourse and can help emergent ideologies become part of the dominant ideology. Much of this ideological work is accomplished through the review process. Reviews influence how a spectator sees a play, affecting a spectator's horizon of expectation. Reviews also spread a production's discourse beyond the people who see the play. This can even occur when a review disagrees with the play's ideology, as in the case of the *Christian Science Monitor*'s coverage of AIDS in its negative review of *The Normal Heart*. An important insight gained from using materialist semiotics as a methodology is that reviews do much more political work than previously credited.

The newfound importance of reviews has implications for many fields of study. The most obvious is theatre history. Though Ric Knowles limits his use of materialist semiotics to only those productions the critic attends, the analyses of *The Normal Heart* and *Angels in America* show how reviews can be used to supplement first-hand experience to examine how a play was received. This method can never completely

replace the knowledge gained by attendance. However, if scholars approach individual spectators as representatives of broader ideological communities with similar horizons of expectations, then individual reviews can be approached as material evidence of the ideology of that critic's community. This was played-out during my analysis of *Homebody/Kabul* when my own reactions aligned with the reviews that expected the play to be (and saw the play as) a critique of the Bush administration's contemporaneous politics. Reviews can suggest how a particular group of spectators reacted to a production, and in that way they can stand in for personal attendance. Further, because these case studies demonstrated how much political work was done through reviews, they highlight that reviews are one important source of data. Any theatre historian examining a production from a period in which theatre was reviewed could take reviews into account to gain a sense of how the production was assimilated into contemporaneous ideologies. For example, reviews of *Homebody/Kabul* show how the historical moment of its production and the horizon of expectation created by the media in that moment allowed its spectators to use the production to support the emergent ideology that spoke out against Bush's "war on terror." First, this reveals that despite the fact that the theatre is a place of discipline and socialization, spectators and critics have a great deal of power when decoding the production. Second, if one simply analyzed the text of *Homebody/Kabul* without examining the reviews, it would not be possible to see it as a dissenting voice from the "war on terror" rhetoric. However,

analyzing the reviews of the production, one can see that the text was received almost exclusively as "about" the war on terror despite the lack of evidence for this reading in the text. This reveals the power of reviews as evidence for how a performance text was received.

The importance of reviews also has implications for the study of performances that occur outside the mainstream. Even if the performance under examination is not reviewed in the theatre pages of major newspapers, one could investigate how the discourse of the performance may have spread into media coverage. For example, in *The Radical in Performance*, Baz Kershaw examines a 1980 parade called *Glasgow All Lit Up!*. While he referentially cites one newspaper article in his description of the parade, he does not extend his ideological analysis of the performance to media coverage. Was the parade reported in the national press? Did the radical ideology he finds in the parade's community involvement get transmitted via the media outside of Glasgow? Was the radical ideology of the parade negated in press coverage rather than furthered? These are the kinds of questions one could assess when considering the importance of media coverage and performance outside the mainstream.

Similarly, reviews offer an intriguing source of data for studies centering on television and film. Contemporary television programs and movies have a rich trove of media coverage, ranging from sanctioned reviews to internet discussions (such as blogs) run by fans. Other conditions of reception that are part of an analysis when

examining a specific theatrical production (like the neighborhood of the theatre and the theatre's architecture) would not be possible when examining a movie or television show since they are seen in so many locations at once. However, one could imagine doing similar work by taking into account what type of release a movie had (e.g., immediate national release, Los Angeles and New York first followed by a national release, straight to video, or an independent sleeper that eventually gained a national distributor) and on what type of channel a television show aired (e.g., PBS, cable, national network, or local network). For example, a scholar could explore the differences in ideological work done by a major motion picture release such as *Brokeback Mountain* alongside a cable channel film like *The Laramie Project*. All of these variables would influence the conditions of reception; analyzing them would give insight into the ideological work done by the television show or movie.

This discussion further suggests that broad claims of political efficacy of mainstream theatre can be made. As tempting as it is to address mainstream theatre's ability to spark political change, the analyses of the case studies here cannot be extended into a causal argument. However, the major claim that these case studies sustain is that mainstream theatre can support emergent (and, therefore, dissenting) ideologies. None of these case studies shows a causal relationship between a production's ideology and a corresponding change in society, but two of them (*The Normal Heart* and *Angels in America*) reveal how mainstream productions and the

subsequent media coverage supported emergent ideologies. It is likely that these two case studies reflected already existing emergent ideologies; without an expression in the mainstream, however, it is unlikely that the emergent ideologies would have been assimilated into the dominant one. *The Normal Heart* and *Angels in America* were two of the mainstream expressions of these emerging ideologies that helped them into the public sphere. In the case of *The Normal Heart*, David Román points out that many productions about AIDS existed outside of mainstream theatre before *The Normal Heart* (*Acts of Intervention* 64); none of these productions, however, garnered the type of press coverage and publicity that is standard with a production at the off-Broadway Public Theatre. Similarly, while many mainstream productions took gay men and AIDS as their themes after 1985, *Angels in America* was greeted differently by the press: "you will see how skillfully Kushner navigates between, say, the shrill accusations of Larry Kramer's *The Destiny of Me* and the soggy affirmations of William Finn's *Falsettos*" (Brustein "Angels in America" 29). Because *Angels in America* was hailed as a classic that allowed its characters to be seen as universal, its cultural position then allowed gay men to be imagined as part of the U.S. nation.

When discussing how ideologies change, Williams coins the term "structure of feeling" which he defines as "a cultural hypothesis, actually derived from attempts to understand such elements and their connections in a generation or period, and needing always to be returned, interactively, to such evidence" (R. Williams 197). There may be

no way to empirically prove that *The Normal Heart* or *Angels in America* caused any ideological shift in society, but by returning to the material evidence of their media reception, one can demonstrate that each of the plays was an articulation of an emergent ideology that most of the mainstream media, in any case, was ready to address, discuss, and, then, accept. This acceptance suggests that the emergent ideologies supported by *The Normal Heart*, *Angels in America*, and their media reception became more a part of the dominant ideology. Reviews and other conditions of reception are a way of examining, if not measuring, how a production is "a cultural hypothesis" (R. Williams 197). Reviews also show how mainstream culture responds "to such evidence" of an emergent ideology (R. Williams 197). Since the reviews of *The Normal Heart* almost universally called for attention to the previously ignored AIDS epidemic, they show how the production helped the emergent ideology into the mainstream. Similarly, by allowing that *Angels in America* was "universal" and "art," its media coverage explicitly or implicitly suggested that gay men ought to be full citizens in the U.S. nation. These two cultural artifacts seem to be examples of Williams' "structure of feeling" since each articulate an already existing emergent ideology that was in the process of being accepted.

Materialist semiotics is an efficient method with which to examine theatrical productions that may have articulated a "structure of feeling." Williams continues: "as a matter of cultural theory this is a way of defining norms and conventions in art and

literature as inalienable elements of a social material process: not by derivation from other social forms and pre-forms, but as social formation of a specific kind which may in turn be seen as the articulation (often the only fully available articulation) of structures of feeling which as living processes are much more widely experienced" (R. Williams 197). Materialist semiotics allows the texts that are part of the "social material process" to be examined, but also examines theatrical productions "as living processes [that] are much more widely experienced." It does so by maintaining the rigor of textual analysis but adding a context for that analysis (the conditions of production) and, most importantly, by *returning* to that context to examine how the artifact was received by society (the conditions of reception). If a production that supports an emergent ideology is received well—as with *The Normal Heart* and *Angels in America*—it is fair to hypothesize that the emergent ideology is "much more widely experienced" than the dominant ideology acknowledges. It suggests that the production is part of the moment when the emergent ideology becomes part of the dominant one. While the analyses and methodological innovations in this dissertation may not prove mainstream theatre's ability to cause political change, they effectively show that mainstream theatre can be the mediating force that supports the assimilation of an emergent ideology by the dominant one. In so doing, this dissertation gestures toward the extant political applicability of mainstream theatre's support for emergent ideologies.

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