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Michael Billington applauds the ambition of Angels In America

Nation built on guilt

TONY KUSHNER could be accused of un-American activities. In *Angels In America* at the Cottesloe he has written a big, noisy, public play about the state of the nation; and this is only the first three-and-a-half hour segment of a two-part work. It is far from perfect, but it has a roller-coaster energy that sweeps one along in its wake.

Guilt, I take it, is the theme that plaits together the story's multiple strands. Roy Cohn, Senator McCarthy's former sidekick, may not seem crippled by it except that when, in 1986, he discovers he has Aids, he memorably tells his doctor "Roy is a heterosexual man who fucks with guys". But Joe Pitt, a Cohn protégé and a straight-up Mormon with a pill-popping wife, is riddled with guilt on discovering he himself is a closet gay. And Louis Ironson, a word-processing Jewish clerk, is mortified by his own panicky, helpless response to his lover's hospitalisation with Aids.

What Mr Kushner seems to be saying in this hurtling play — subtitled *A Gay Fantasia On National Themes* — is that guilt is part of America's Judaic and Puritan inheritance; and that it has been exacerbated by the society's failure to live up to its utopian dreams. Indeed, Mr Kushner paints a lurid picture

of a country where justice is purchasable, where Cohn and a presidential aide toast the death of liberalism, and where Louis sees everyone as Reagan's children — "selfish and greedy and loveless and blind."

Mr Kushner, who in *A Bright Room Called Day* at the Bush in 1988 equated Thatcher's Britain with Hitler's Germany, is no stranger to exaggeration. But the chief fault of this play is that he seems enthralled by his own virtuosity. Scenes spool on verbosely, particularly those involving Joe's wife, who is driven to Valium by her ecological passion and lack of marital sex. I also winced at the whimsicality of the episodes where she has a vision of Antarctica and where a Heavenly messenger arrives to claim Joe's lover: at these points Kushner seems like a hip J M Barrie.

But Kushner's overwhelming virtue is that, unlike most American dramatists, he is unafraid to link private and public worlds. The scenes where Louis discovers his lover has Aids are unflinchingly honest; but, instead of simply wringing our hearts, Mr Kushner develops the point that society's "bourgeois tolerance" conceals a passionate hatred. Even better, for my money, is the scene where the power-crazy Cohn denies his homosexuality to his doctor



Star-crossed lovers . . . Nick Ormerod's design helps to achieve a breathtaking fluidity

PHOTOGRAPH: DOUGLAS JEFFREY

not so much for fear of social stigma as because gays have zero clout. Mr Kushner avoids the melodrama inherent in many Aids plays by constantly relating sex to social attitudes.

You could say he chews off more than he can bite — giving us glimpses of Mormon morality and the mutual antipathy between many American blacks and Jews — but I infinitely prefer a play with too many themes to too few. And he is beautifully served by Declan Donnellan's direction and Nick Ormerod's design, which achieve a breathtaking fluidity: scene melts into scene, the company truck the furniture on and off and the detail feels right, down to the images of Garbo and Bette Davis that decorate the gay lovers' bedhead.

Donnellan also has a Bryden-like ability to combine ensemble work with a respect for individual performance. Outstanding here is Henry Goodman, whose Cohn has a buzz-saw voice, stabbing forefingers and a close-cut ferocity that suggests power is the most dangerous drug on the market. But there is also good work from Nick Reding as the shy,

closeted Mormon, Felicity Montagu as his flaky wife, Marcus D'Amico as the guilt-stricken Louis, and Joseph Mydell as a compassionate black queen.

Sprawling and over-written as it may be, it is a play of epic energy that gets American drama not just out of the closet but, thank God, out of the living-room as well.

Billington On Angels Kushner

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