

Published November 10th, 2010

Angels in America at SMC

By Lou Fancher



Saint Mary's College Angels in America: Andrew Galindo on left as Roy; Liam Callister as Joe. Z Photo Michael Cook

Reid, who will direct the production, says the play fits well with the college's "Rethinking America's Changing Face" theme for the year. "Students can keep their core identities while learning about other values," he explains. "SMC makes space for many viewpoints," he says, before admitting that "every production of this play has been met with a rigorous and healthy dialogue."

When pressed, he answers with care, saying the choice of a play about homosexuality prompted "deeply felt articulations of support, as well as concerns." The most immediate concerns were the original play's nudity, (there will be none,) and how a scene that includes a sexual act will be staged (the characters will be isolated on separate parts of the stage and will speak the lines, with no physical portrayal of the scene). Once these questions were addressed, Reid says "the concerns weren't gone, but the play and the complementary conversations will be an opportunity to continue the dialogue."

In collaboration with the School of Liberal Arts, SMC is hosting four panel discussions related to the play, covering subjects like "AIDS at 30 Years: Crisis and Compassion", and "Making Change: Art and Social Justice". Reid expects the blend of both traditional and progressive voices to shed light on the Catholic Church's role as a relief organization during the AIDS crisis. "The Church provided care, comfort-and leadership," he says, emphatically. "For college students in 2010, the AIDS crisis is historical. They don't have an immediate sense, a lived sense of the fear, the desperation, of the epidemic."

Reid says the most challenging aspect of Angels in America is "the enormity of the research." The students met with hospice nurses, a doctor who worked in an AIDS ward, and Lorri Holt, an original company cast member from the San Francisco professional production. "Acting requires integrity, so we train our actors to go deeply into the characters they are portraying," he says.

With this particular play, that means examining their sexuality, their compassion for alternative lifestyles within a community, even their family histories. "They've come to understand that 30 years ago, a generation of young people was dropping. They've had to think about living in a time of plague," Reid says.

According to Reid, all theater "celebrates life, honors the common human struggles, educates, advocates and builds a community." Inspired, and encouraged to explain how this relates his choice of Angels in America, he continues: "The ancients understood the sacred nature of storytelling. Theater arrives in all forms: on stage, in a family gathering, in a sports arena, around an organized, common cause. Its power is in how it bridges differences, in a way that technology inhibits. There's a warm, hand-to-warm-hand tradition in theater."

Whether warm turns to hot will largely be determined by the temperature and tone of the dialogues: it is, after all, partly a play about homosexuality. The college intends for the talks to be civil conversations, not debates, according to Reid. "We will be discussing Church teachings on homosexuality from a range of perspectives," he says.

Angels in America is a play with humor and horror, aimed at social justice education and seeking to ask the question posed by Mother Theresa: "How can we provide compassionate care to those in need?" Reid, who has spoken for a full hour about the production, the students, and the process of bringing it to the stage, finally rests, saying, "It really is about our deepest spiritual values."

Professor Reid Davis spent more than a year selecting Angels in America, the Saint Mary's College Performing Arts Department's fall production.

Reading plays, talking to students, considering curricula in related courses and the theater department's "season of angels" theme, Reid digested copious amounts of information and input while making the decision. "And, I made an informal poll with our English professors," he adds, "I heard Angels in America over and over again."

Tony Kushner's Pulitzer Prize winning play about the origins of the AIDS crisis in the late 1980's has been named "one of the ten best plays of the century," by London's National Theatre. It has received rave reviews; calling it "deep", "spiritual", and "thrilling". The play deals with timeless issues-life, death and faith-while chronicling the domestic drama of two couples, whose lives intersect.

"It's Kushner, thinking about the richest and the poorest: the most and the least powerful," Reid says. "The play's reach is Shakespearean. The issues are personal as well as global. Kushner is working on an epic scale and thinking about a nation at a particular time in history."

Angels in America, Part One (Adult Subject Matter)

LeFevre Theatre, Saint Mary's College, 1928 St. Mary's Road, Moraga

Performance Schedule:

November 11, 12, 13, 19 and 20 at 7:30pm; November 14 and 21 at 2pm

Tickets: \$15 general; \$12 Saint Mary's faculty and staff and non-SMC students; \$8 SMC students

Reservations: (925) 631-4670 or www.stmarys-ca.edu/arts

There will be staged readings (free to all) of Part Two:

Perestroika on November 14 and 16 at 7pm and November 20 at 2pm in Hagerty Lounge.

Panel Discussions:

AIDS at 30 Years: Crisis and Compassion (Nov. 9)

Love and Sexuality: Spiritual Perspectives (Nov. 12)

America's Changing Face: the Politics of Identity (Nov. 15)

Making Change: Art and Social Justice (Nov. 18)

All panel discussions will take place in Delphine Intercultural Center at 4:30.

Reach the reporter at: info@lamorindaweekly.com

Copyright © Lamorinda Weekly, Moraga CA