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'Angels in America: Millennium Approaches'

By Sophie Braccini



From left: Joe Pitt (Alan Coyne), Roy Cohn (Jerry Motta), and Martin Heller (Alex Bogorad) Photos Stu Selland

Town Hall Theatre's new production, "Angels in America," is one of the most ambitious and powerful plays produced by the local theatre group yet. The Pulitzer Prize-winning play by Tony Kushner resists easy synopsis. Set in 1985's Reagan-era America, it unflinchingly portrays AIDS and the politics of the time while remaining fresh and relevant by contemplating the themes of good versus evil, the use and misuse of power, courage in the face of adversity, and what it truly means to be human.

THT was ready for this play, and so is its audience. It is rated 'R' for good reasons, but it should not shock the Lamorinda public.

"This is one of the most powerful plays I ever read," says THT artistic director Joel Roster who chose and directed the play. "I had never seen it on this side of the tunnel. It was time to show it here."

The play is set in New York and shows the intertwined lives of different people struggling and trying to cope with the disease. At the center are two troubled couples: Prior (Jeffrey Draper) and Louis (Dennis Markam), a gay couple, and Harper (Alex Bogorad) and Joe (Alan Coyne), a straight one. Prior has AIDS and Louis cannot deal with it. Joe, who works in the same law office as Louis, is a Mormon struggling with his sexual identity. His mentor Roy (Jerry Motta) is a corrupt lawyer who also learns he has AIDS. The play deals with their personal struggles, but also with social issues and questions about community, racism and democracy. Tragic and poignant, the play is not without humor and sarcasm.

Roster adds that 50 to 60 actors came to audition, and it is quite understandable. This is great contemporary theater, steeped in a specific time period but with a universal reach. It has an incredibly rich text that pushes the actors to the limit of their ability. Town Hall Theatre Company completely meets the challenge.

The actors give their best. Draper as Prior portrays a very sick man at times transcended by his disease with a chilling, raw power, while his tortured partner played by a very good Markam crumbles before the audience's eyes. Bogorad is Joe's wife, an emotionally challenged young woman, vulnerable, poetic and touching. Coyne as Joe struggles as he attempts to reconcile the purity of his conservative values with his secret desires. Motta clashes relentlessly with the other protagonists, unafraid and unapologetic for his lack of morals. The rest of the cast does well.

Roster says that this cast has been one of the most supportive he's ever worked with and that all of them came prepared to present a bold performance. There is a remarkable harmony to the show, as scenes rapidly blend into new scenes, sometimes with two different actions occurring simultaneously on either side of the stage, captivating the audience.

Special mention for the set. Roster and his team designed sliding doors that define both sides of the stage. This smart construction allows for a rapid change of props and setting, and also creates dramatic movement with the addition of lights and sounds.

This is the first part of a two-part play. The second part will be presented in February next year. "Some groups show the two parts together," says Roster. "That is a five hour performance. Next year, when we present the second part, we will have a refresher in the afternoon for our subscribers."

The play runs through Feb. 28. Friday nights (Feb. 13 and 20) are Theatre Club Nights with free wine and talkback sessions with the director and cast immediately following the performance. For tickets, call (925) 283-1557 or go to www.TownHallTheatre.com.



From left: Harper Pitt (Alex Bogorad) and Prior Walter (Jeffrey Draper)

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