

Fighting The Culture Wars In Academia

By James Fisher

Social questions are produced by the conflict of human institutions with human feeling.¹

– George Bernard Shaw

Skirmishes in the culture wars have arisen at an alarming rate on our nation's campuses, usually over the validity of curricular and artistic offerings that depart from "traditional" values and the "traditional" western canon.

What exactly "traditional" means seems to be in the eye of the beholder. Conservatives argue for a prescribed set of texts and ideas. But many artists and scholars would argue that society's conflicts have always been an essential part of the tradition of the academy.

The experience of staging *Milennium Approaches*, the first part of Tony Kushner's epic Pulitzer Prize-winning drama *Angels in America*, at an all-male liberal arts college in a predominantly conserv-

ative midwestern town, provided me, my students, and my colleagues an unsettling, but perhaps inevitable, skirmish in what appears to be a struggle for the country's moral, political, and cultural soul.

Angels in America is perfect fodder for the culture wars. The play deals with such sensitive issues as religious beliefs, the cultural and personal effects of the AIDS pandemic, and the struggle for moral clarity and social equity in a complex society.

Finally, *Angels* dramatizes the eternal struggle between Conservative and Liberal — "the liberal pluralist solution (everyone do his or her own thing) against the conservative solution (everyone do the conservatives' thing)"² — and, more specifically, the struggle over attitudes about homosexuality in American society.

Kushner is a rarity: an American socio-political dramatist. The lyricism and emotional potency

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'In an era of wrenching social changes, political theatre is important,' Kushner told my students.

found in plays by Tennessee Williams and John Guare have influenced Kushner, but he is closer in spirit to Henrik Ibsen, George Bernard Shaw, and especially Bertolt Brecht, whom he greatly admires.

Combining qualities from Ibsen, Shaw, and Brecht — mixing starkly realistic lives and naturalistic language with ambitiously universal themes burnished by elements of fantasy and theatricality — Kushner transcends all of them.

This playwright believes that all art is political and that “I cannot be a playwright without having some temptation to let audiences know what I think when I read the newspaper in the morning. What I find is that the things that make you the most uncomfortable are the best things to write plays about.”³

The furor over Kushner’s plays has become vitriolic in many instances and seems to focus most centrally on the gay content of *Angels*.

When I first read *Millennium Approaches*, I was powerfully moved by its unique mixture of feverish theatrical fantasy and blunt social reality, and by the playwright’s ability to achieve so much on both thematic and aesthetic levels.

The play presents the mid-1980s as a critical transitional peri-

od that posed potent questions about the future of American society. It depicts a “dissolution of relationships and the various unmoorings seem to be the prelude to a revolution, the creation of a new order.”⁴

Kushner wonders if we can constructively embrace the changes that are occurring. He explores the question by examining a few individuals in the intimacy of their private lives at moments of significant personal crisis. These personal lives are interwoven with the cross-currents of America’s past to create an intense historical drama about our recent past.

I could not recall a time I had been as impressed by a play on first reading. As a theatre director with more than 25 years experience, I hoped for a chance to direct it, but, at first, this seemed an impossible dream.

Kushner came to Wabash in 1995 and met with a class I was teaching on his plays and responded to questions about his entire body of work.

In an era of wrenching social changes, political theatre is important, he told my students.

“Good political theater asks complicated questions,” he explained. “It explores. It doesn’t offer simple dogma. Those who are involved in the struggles to change the world need art that assists in

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examining the issues at hand.”⁵

Kushner attributed his interest in political theatre to his childhood in Louisiana, where he encountered both mild anti-Semitism and more virulent homophobia.

After his meeting with the class, Kushner gave a dynamic public lecture to an enthusiastic full house. The privilege of introducing him fell to me, and I announced that, after all, our Theatre Department's next season would begin with a production of *Millennium Approaches*.

I didn't realize it at the time, but Kushner's visit and the announcement of the production triggered what became a year-long local skirmish in the culture wars.

Frrightened administrators, confused alumni and local citizens, angry canon-worshippers, the politically correct, and the media all came out of the woodwork for what became a test of the meaning of academic freedom and the role of the artist in a community.

Things spun out of control at once. What might have been a minor controversy was exaggerated by the presence on campus of a student-run, right-wing publication calling itself *The Commentary*.

Largely the work of two students, this publication had emerged on campus a year or so before Kushner's visit. The publication

was backed by a small but wealthy group of conservative alumni (and, as I would later learn, a few members of the college's Board of Trustees), and, at various times, its banner noted that the publication received financial support from an array of national conservative organizations.

In the pages of *The Commentary*, a philosophy course on the Holocaust was condemned as “trendy,” reading *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* was ridiculed, and the showing of such films as Martin Scorsese's *The Last Temptation of Christ* was called “shameful.” A faculty member's voting record was reported (inaccurately), and other staff were treated to biased and offensively personal reviews of campus lectures and publications. One particularly repugnant *Commentary* tactic: those students the publication suspected of being gay were referred in print as “fragile” individuals.

Snooping in wastebaskets, calling past employers of staff in hopes of finding “dirt,” and starting unfounded rumors became standard practice. By boldly claiming the right to define the sides and frame the issues, *The Commentary* caught Wabash College off-guard.

Wabash's president, Andrew T. Ford, and his administration were in full panic by the time we announced the production of

I was drawn most powerfully to the play's aesthetic challenges and the forthrightness of its arguments.

Angels. There is no question that Ford was concerned about the potential controversy he believed — accurately — that *The Commentary* could whip up among alumni and the parents of students.

The Commentary speculated about my motives in selecting the play for production. I was certainly not unaware of possible fallout, but expected no more than that some members of the community might not like the play's subject, something that to some degree is likely with any play selection.

Wabash, an institution that prides itself on the open and free exchange of ideas, had long since become accustomed to so-called controversial material in theatre and other disciplines at the college. The Theatre Department had presented such works for decades, from *A Streetcar Named Desire* and *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* to *Fortune* and *Men's Eyes* and *Breaking the Code*.

I could imagine that in 1959 *A Streetcar Named Desire* or in 1969 *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* might well have been more shocking than *Angels* would seem in 1996.

There had been two basic and unwavering tenets that had traditionally guided the theatre program at the college. First, that a vigorous effort be made to present students with the widest possible

range of drama and, secondly, that the artistic and intellectual content of the plays selected provide significant and multi-leveled challenges to both student participants and audiences.

Among the students and many members of the Wabash community, the planned production of *Angels* generated as much enthusiasm as dread. But I might have suspected there would be more than the usual fallout for this production when, shortly after Kushner's campus visit, the dean of the college, P. Donald Herring, a personal friend, informed me that President Ford would like to meet with me to learn more about our Theatre Department.

Armed with course descriptions and such, I was prepared to discuss the department's mission and philosophy. It came, then, as a surprise when the president's first question, following a pointed reminder that he and I had always had friendly relations, was about the choice of *Angels*.

His concern focused almost exclusively on the play's depiction of homosexuality. This focus might, he felt, cause "controversy" and produce a negative effect on donations to the college.

After I answered a number of questions about the play and we

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danced around the issue, I pointedly asked if he was asking the Theatre Department to reconsider doing the play.

The president said no, but made it clear that our discussions were not over.

My second meeting with Ford two weeks later was largely a repeat of the first, with different strategies employed on both sides. The president tested the waters with a game of "What If?" What would happen if he should ask us not to do the play? I replied that this question convinced me he wanted to ask us not to do the play.

When he didn't answer, I asked if he had, in fact, received negative responses from alumni. He replied that at least one alumnus had expressed his "outrage" at discovering Wabash was going to put on "a play with two guys screwing each other."

It became clear that the real problem stemmed from a practical brand of homophobia. Ford and other concerned parties might not actually fear gays, but they did fear the presumed impact on "conservative" donors and the "marketing" of the college. Alumniphobia might be a more accurate term.

Ford pointed out that some individuals believed putting on the play was tantamount to condoning, celebrating, or recommending the "gay lifestyle," a religious and polit-

ical problem for many.

Fair enough, I responded, but at the point where their beliefs overrode the rights of others to study and explore the issues, something of greater significance seemed to be at stake: academic freedom.

Examining difficult, controversial, unsettling, and unpopular viewpoints is, in my view, essential to a college's long-term health, which is why I left my meetings with President Ford annoyed that we had now spent in excess of three hours with no conclusion in sight. If the president was not asking us to reconsider, or hoping to pressure us into a reconsideration, why did we need to talk again?

This time, I didn't keep my meeting with the president secret. I replayed both encounters to colleagues in the arts at the college, telling them I felt the president was applying pressure. No one had ever challenged a play selection, so what else could it suggest? A sudden interest in drama on his part?

The controversy came to a head when the college's humanities faculty learned of my meetings with the president. There was a small uproar that ended with the president being invited to a division meeting to respond to questions on academic freedom.

Annoyed by the president's insistence that I raised the sugges-

The president's view was that work with a public component wasn't protected by academic freedom.

tion of a meeting to discuss the play in the first place, I wrote asking him why would I initiate a discussion about whether or not to do the play when I'd just attained the rights to do it after strenuously seeking them?

Regardless of who initiated the talks, I stressed in an E-mail, he "shouldn't have applied pressure, even if it was unintentional, and having done it and realized that it was being felt that way—as I clearly expressed in each of our meetings—you should have stopped it and indicated that it was wrong."

There was no reply.

The president did appear at a meeting of the Humanities Division in mid-February 1996, where he answered general and largely polite questions about issues of academic freedom.

I kept quiet throughout, even when I felt the President's version of our discussions was inaccurate, and when it became apparent that it was not at all clear in Ford's mind that collegiate theatre productions were protected by the tenets of academic freedom.

This view, of course, had potentially enormous ramifications beyond *Angels*.

Music concerts, art gallery exhibits, poetry readings, lectures, publications, college worship ser-

vices, and even the library's programs would then become accessible to the president's censoring eye. How far a leap would it then be into the traditional classroom?

At about this time, *The Commentary* stepped up its public assault. The publication posted the most potentially shocking scene from *Millennium Approaches* on its Web page, sent it to alumni as an E-mail message, and published it in *The Commentary* itself.

This scene (Act II, Scene 4) depicts an encounter between Louis, a gay man in despair over abandoning his AIDS-infected partner, and an anonymous man in Central Park. It is frank and brutal as Kushner makes Louis's despair and self-destructive impulses vividly real:

MAN: Relax.

LOUIS (A small laugh): Not a chance.

MAN: It . . .

LOUIS: What?

MAN: I think it broke. The rubber. You want me to keep going? (Little pause) Pull out?

Should I . . .

LOUIS: Keep going.

Infect me.

I don't care. I don't care.⁶

Out of context, the scene is indeed powerful. In context, it grows in complexity as it reveals Louis's faithlessness, and it is essential to

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fully appreciate the level of his anguish and self-disgust.

The actions of a specific character in any play may appear shocking, but that behavior, when placed in perspective by the playwright and with the entire play around it to make its meaning clear, may seem less shocking and, in fact, significantly illuminating.

In our production I planned for the two actors in these roles to be at opposite ends of the stage in tight spotlights to suggest Louis's emotional distance from the stranger and, obviously, to make the scene a suggestion instead of a graphic depiction, which I felt was inappropriate in a student production.

The Commentary's sensationalizing of the scene was meant to convince its readers that we planned to stage it graphically. This was never intended, as I had made clear to Ford in our first meeting when he, too, presumed that the scene would be staged realistically.

Shortly after the president appeared at the division meeting, there was a gathering of the Board of Trustees on campus, where they discussed the play.

It was clear that the announcement of the production had caused a furor. The concept of academic freedom finally prevailed at the Board meeting, but the trustees

hardly seemed satisfied. A few worried that some faculty members, who might be bitter about a recent negative decision on an institutional change to coeducation, were "indifferent or worse" to the general good of Wabash.

In response, I angrily wrote to the president on February 6, 1996: "You and the trustees need to consider if your lack of trust in the faculty is not hurting the college much, much more" than doing *Angels* might.

At another staff meeting, the president indicated that the theatre department was going ahead with plans to do the play and, according to several individuals who attended the meeting, he added "it will hurt the college."

Despite the controversy swirling about the campus, production work continued. Matters worsened when word leaked out that the president and at least one of the Wabash trustees had funded and booked a panel discussion generically titled "Freedom and Responsibility in a Liberal Arts Community," and that this discussion was scheduled for the night before the play would open.

Panelists were rumored to include such well-known conservative pundits as Gertrude Himmelfarb and Michael Medved.

I protested to the president that the creation of the panel was an

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unfriendly and unfair tactic. It would only succeed in drawing a bold red circle around *Angels*, as though it had to be apologized for by costly measures. Surely we were not planning to have panels to counter every program on campus that had a point of view (and before they even occurred!), so why this one?

Ford denied that the panel was about the play. Its scheduling the night before the play's opening, he said, was merely an unfortunate coincidence.

It was soon announced that the panel would indeed feature Himmelfarb and Medved. Himmelfarb, commentator for *The Weekly Standard* and *American Enterprise*, and Medved, author of *Hollywood vs. America* and radio stand-in for Rush Limbaugh, would be the "conservative" panelists.

For the "liberal" side, Jonathan Rauch, author of *Kindly Inquisitors* and journalist for *The New Republic*, *Reason*, and *National Journal*, and Nat Hentoff, veteran writer for *The Village Voice* and *The Washington Post*, were announced. Dinesh D'Souza, described as a senior domestic policy analyst for the Reagan White House and author of *Illiberal Education: The Politics of Race and Sex on Campus*, was named moderator.

Whatever its intention, the panel, from all published reports,

seemed to have focused almost exclusively on the play.

The cast and crew of *Angels* could not attend since our final dress rehearsal took place during the panel. Ford met with the cast that same night before the start of the panel and pointedly told the *Angels* company that the panel "was not about the play."

But, when area newspaper accounts appeared the next day with headlines like "Panel Weighs Controversial Drama, Excludes Playwright," the students were puzzled by the president's pointed denial. One anonymous cast member posted a clipping on the callboard with "Huh?" written across it in red lipstick.

According to the published accounts, Himmelfarb turned out to be vehemently opposed to the play, claiming that as a Jew she was offended by some of the play's content in the spiritual area.

"I do think the play is a deliberate attempt to flout conventional sentiments, beliefs, values, principles," Himmelfarb is quoted as saying. "And I think the author of the play would be very disturbed if people said that wasn't the purpose and effect of the play. It is purposely and provocatively pornographic, obscene and scatological."⁷

Medved called *Angels* "an impressive work," but questioned

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whether it should be presented at a college. For him, the academy should “avoid deeply offensive subjects and promote traditional religious beliefs and family values.”⁸

D’Souza added that “the play has aesthetic merit, but its demanding political message about homosexuality goes too far.”⁹

Hentoff disagreed: “It’s sometimes necessary for civility and responsibility to be superseded by freedom of expression,”¹⁰ he said.

Rauch pointed out that “a central responsibility in a liberal community, and a liberal arts community, is to be thick-skinned,” and he praised Wabash for “being willing to offend some people,”¹¹ adding that “I am a member of two certified minority groups — one is Jewish, the other is homosexual. And I am personally appalled by the notion that the best way to protect people like me is to make rules that allow the majority to repress people whose opinions they disagree with and find offensive.”¹²

Kushner did not learn of the panel until *The Commentary* editors called him a few days before it was to take place, deceptively identifying themselves as representatives of the school newspaper and naming only the conservative members of the panel.

Kushner was understandably furious, saying the panel should have been held after the perfor-

mances “so the play would have a chance to speak for itself first.”¹³

He added that he found the panel to be a “hanging jury” and referred to Medved, D’Souza, and Himmelfarb as “homophobic and right-wing.”¹⁴ In his view, the panel discussion would “constitute gay-bashing” and a “tactical strike against the play, so it isn’t seen as a success.”¹⁵

Ford and David Givens, the Trustee funding the panel, had hired a public relations firm to sell their panel as a story to local media. This accomplished little other than alerting area reporters that the college was involved in some sort of pre-emptive damage control. At this point, the local media went into high gear with front page stories, seeking the most sensationalizing voices from various perspectives.

Most of the reporters didn’t even bother to visit the campus, attend a rehearsal, talk to students (except those from *The Commentary* staff), or even read the play. After some of these reports appeared in statewide newspapers, pro and con letters to the editor began appearing with regularity.

In the final days leading up to the performances, I was inundated with mail and messages. I was congratulated on my courage, lectured about moral and fiscal responsibili-

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ty, and called every conceivable name from “son of a bitch” to “fag-lover.”

On campus, as posters for the play began to go up on doors and bulletin boards, a virtual poster war began. *The Commentary* added its own posters to those announcing the production, featuring negative quotes about the play. In response, anonymous contributions began appearing. A particularly amusing one was headed “Think For Yourself, Part One: Close-Mindedness Approaches.”

On the day of our opening, I received a call from a local reporter asking about rumors of a planned demonstration or audience walkout.

After some frantic discussions, two plain-clothes security men were hired by the college to be on duty in the lobby and theatre before and during the performances, and I reluctantly acquiesced to the administration’s request that a warning statement be added to the programs.

Also at this point, Lawrence Biemiller, a critic and reporter from the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, turned up to observe final rehearsals and the opening.

The opening performance, and the three subsequent showings, went off without a hitch. There were no demonstrations, and it

turned out that these rumors had been started by *The Commentary*. We had the largest audiences ever for a Wabash play, and each performance ended with a standing ovation from the audience.

Biemiller’s visit led to a full-page feature/review of the play that kept the focus on the work of the students involved and the play’s significance. He wrote that the performance

did not disappoint, not even—and this is not said lightly—in comparison with the Broadway production. The 3 1/2 hours, 26-scene performance was humorous whenever it could be, fabulous when it needed to be, moving when it should have been. It would have been an achievement at, say, New York University. At Wabash—an 824-student, all-male liberal-arts college in a small town—it was stunning.¹⁶

The headline of the *Indianapolis Star*’s review read “Wabash Cast Triumphant in Play About Fallibility and Forgiveness,” with writer Marion Garmel noting that *Angels* “opened without incident Wednesday night at Wabash College, and the triumph belonged to the students on stage.”¹⁷

Noting that the performance had received a standing ovation, Garmel added, “To get right to the

point, little is offensive enough to warrant the controversy that has arisen over presenting this play on the campus of a conservative mid-western men's college."¹⁸

Eric Pfeffinger, *Arts Indiana's* critic, followed suit, noting:

Wabash's funny and moving production of *Angels* conveyed the intellect and the chutzpa of Kushner's quite remarkable play."¹⁹

In utter relief, I was quoted as saying, "I'm very proud of the students." That's been the greatest thing about this."²⁰

All of us seek to know what of value can be taken from any experience, and there were some obvious lessons to be learned in this case.

The embattled cast became a family like none I have ever experienced, rehearsing and performing the play in a galvanized state, admirably committed to the project despite the extraordinary external pressures.

A few close friends offered moral support, both publicly and privately. My wife, who acted in the production, and our two children provided unwavering love and encouragement.

Members of the campus and local gay community, many carefully closeted, found ways to show sup-

port for the production and the effort to get it on.

One such expression, written by Wabash sophomore Joydeep Sengupta, took the form of a poem that touched me deeply. It seemed to me then, and does now, that Joydeep instinctively understood the need for a play like *Angels* in a society, both the small one of Wabash and the larger American community, struggling to know its own mind.

A dialogue, however divisive, had begun and it would continue. For now, some quarters of Wabash, like American society in general, resist equality, respect for, and greater openness, for gays.

Joydeep's view of the future, as expressed in his poem and the play that inspired it, reflects Kushner's belief in the inevitability of change and the sacrifices that must be made:

Young man of 2040, Greetings from a darker Time! Out of the shadows of my crumbling nightmare, I watch your careless Freedom emerge. Not Half-living in an airless closet, You are Unafraid and Unashamed and Young. Your Body is unfettered, your voice strengthened by all our Anonymous, Unchronicled Wars. ■

NOTES

¹ George Bernard Shaw. *Shaw on Theatre*. New York: Hill & Wang, p. 58.

² Gerald Graff. *Beyond the Culture Wars. How Teaching the Conflicts Can Revitalize American Education*. New York: W.W. Norton, 1992, p. 10.

³ Bob Blanchard, "Playwright of Pain and Hope," *Progressive Magazine*, October 1994, p. 42.

⁴ John Clum, *Acting Gay. Male Homosexuality in Modern Drama*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1994, p. 318.

⁵ Kathy Matter, "Playwright Sets Stage for Change," *Lafayette Journal-Courier*, October 26, 1995, p. A10.

⁶ Tony Kushner. *Angels in America, Part One: Millennium Approaches*. New

- York: Theatre Communications Group, 1992, 1993, p. 57.
- ⁷ Barb Albert, "Panel Weighs Controversial Drama, Excludes Playwright," *Indianapolis Star*, October 9, 1996, p. B7.
- ⁸ Ibid.
- ⁹ Ibid.
- ¹⁰ Ibid.
- ¹¹ Ibid.
- ¹² "Freedom and Responsibility in a Liberal Arts Community," *Wabash Magazine*, Winter 1996, p. 48.
- ¹³ Albert, "Panel Weighs Controversial Drama, Excludes Playwright," p. B7.
- ¹⁴ Ibid.
- ¹⁵ Ibid.
- ¹⁶ Lawrence Biemiller, "Notes from Academe: Angels in America Challenges Students at Wabash College," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, October 18, 1996, p. B2.
- ¹⁷ Marion Garmel, "Wabash Cast Triumphant in Play About Fallibility and Forgiveness," *Indianapolis Star*, October 11, 1996, p. E1.
- ¹⁸ Ibid.
- ¹⁹ Eric Pfeffinger, "Theatre Review: Angels in America," *Arts Indiana*, December 1996, p. 15.
- ²⁰ Gammel, "Wabash Cast Triumphant in Play About Fallibility and Forgiveness," p. E1.

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