

Through a Glass Darkly: Mormons as Perceived by Critics' Reviews of Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*

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INTRODUCTION

MEMBERSHIP IN THE CHURCH OF JESUS CHRIST OF LATTER-DAY SAINTS is expanding rapidly.¹ As the church passes the ten-million member milestone, social science researchers have raised a number of important questions about the rapid growth of Mormonism. Issues include changing Mormon demographics,² cultural tensions of church globalization,³ and the evolu-

1. See Rodney Stark, "Modernization and Mormon Growth: The Secularization Thesis Revisited," in Marie Cornwall, Timothy B. Heaton, & Larry A. Young, eds., *Contemporary Mormonism: Social Science Perspectives* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 13-23; Timothy B. Heaton, "Vital Statistics," in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, ed. D. H. Ludlow (New York: Macmillan, 1992), 4:1518-37.

2. See T. B. Heaton, K. L. Goodman, & T. B. Holman, "In Search of a Peculiar People: Are Mormon Families Really Different?" in *Contemporary Mormonism: Social Science Perspectives* 87-117; K. L. Goodman & T. B. Heaton, "LDS Church Members in the U.S. and Canada," *AMCAP Journal* 12, no.1 (1986): 88-107.

3. *Contemporary Mormonism*, 43; L. A. Young, "Confronting Turbulent Environments: Issues in the Organizational Growth and Globalization of Mormonism" in *Contemporary Mormonism: Social Science Perspectives* 63.

tion of Mormon identity and assimilation.⁴ Another topic of research focuses on mass media use and the role it plays in the ways Mormons accommodate the larger society.⁵ What has not been examined, however, are the ways mass media, such as movies, television, newspapers, etc., tend to describe Mormons.

How religious groups are received by the larger society has much to do with the kinds of information available to citizens. Although messages about Latter-day Saints are disseminated through mass media, little is known about what specifically is said or what kinds of media professionals are involved. New research on this issue could help us understand the ways mass media help create the information environments out of which individuals form impressions or make judgments about various religious denominations.

Scott Abbott⁶ argues that society's accommodation of Mormons may be frustrated by recent works of popular literature and drama which depict Latter-day Saints as "narrow" and "bigoted." He offers as examples John Gardner's novel, *Mickelson's Ghost*, Abbey's *Desert Solitaire*, John Le Carré's *The Russia House*, and Tony Kushner's dramatic work, *Angels in America*. Kushner's Pulitzer Prize-winning play, for example, refers to Salt Lake City as a place of "abundant energy; not much intelligence." Abbott fears that these descriptions could make Mormons vulnerable to future stereotyping and biased criticism.

Abbott focuses on a kind of performance art and literature with admittedly small, elite audiences. The question, however, of whether such portrayals have an impact on larger groups—beyond those who actually see or read the play—must take into account other media actors, such as newspaper critics, who help disseminate elements of literary portrayal to larger audiences. In other words, the way such literary characterizations as depictions of Mormons in *Angels in America* diffuse into the larger society has much to do with the way media organizations filter information through critics, editors, and marketing managers before it is finally conveyed to the public. These individuals are what Kurt Lewin⁷ has termed, "gatekeepers" who control, shape, and expand information as it

4. See Armand Mauss, "Refuge and Retrenchment: The Mormon Quest for Identity," in *Contemporary Mormonism: Social Science Perspectives* 24-42.

5. See Daniel A. Stout, "Resolving Conflicts of Worldviews: LDS Women and Television," *AMCAP Journal* 20, no. 1 (1994): 61-79; JoAnn Valenti & Daniel A. Stout, "Diversity from Within: An Analysis of the Impact of Religious Culture on Media Use and Effective Communication to Women," in D. Stout & J. Buddenbaum, eds., *Religion and Mass Media: Audiences and Adaptations* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1996), 183-196.

6. Scott Abbott, "One Lord, One Faith, Two Universities: Tensions Between "Religion" and "Thought" at BYU," *Sunstone*, Vol. 16 (Sept 1992): 15-23.

7. Kurt Lewin, "Channels of Group Life," *Human Relations* 1 (1947), 143-53.

flows from one source to another. This paper looks at what information media gatekeepers communicate about Mormons as well as about what they discard. By doing so, it seeks to increase understanding about mass media as filters of information on religious groups that are undergoing the process of cultural integration.

CASE STUDY:

Angels in America

In order to learn more about the way media organizations filter information about religious groups, the authors examined newspaper reviews summarizing the depictions of Mormons in Tony Kushner's play, *Angels in America*. Considered by some to be the major or at least most visible work of the decade involving Mormons, *Angels* received a Pulitzer Prize and Tony Awards for Best Play of 1993 (Part I) and Best Play of 1994 (Part II). Set primarily in New York City, it dramatizes the complex interplay between religion, politics, and the AIDS crisis. There are several themes and subplots in this long work, which is presented in two parts, entitled respectively: *Millenium Approaches* and *Perestroika*. The action, however, revolves chiefly around Pryor Walter, a homosexual with AIDS, who interacts with three other main characters who are Mormon. At a more general level, the play is about the consequences of the rise of conservative politics and the perceived inability of American religious institutions to offer guidance to contemporary society, as exemplified particularly in society's failure to embrace the homosexual community in a time of crisis brought about by the AIDS epidemic.

To say that the main goal of *Angels* is to criticize Mormon theology would not be accurate. Kushner himself asserts that "Mormonism is treated with respect and dignity."⁸ Yet as Abbott⁹ observes, there are scenes in the play which, if taken out of context, could evoke stereotypical notions of Mormons as narrow, superficial, and exclusionary. There are scenes, in fact, that would offend many Latter-day Saints. For example, having heard that Mormons believe in angels, Pryor Walter goes to the Mormon Visitor's Center in New York with some questions. There he strikes up a conversation with Harper Pitt, a Valium-addicted, agoraphobic Mormon whose husband Joe has left her to pursue a homosexual affair with Louis Ironson, also a main character.

PRIOR: Do you believe in angels? In the angel Mormon?

8. Nancy Melich, "A Look at the Characters and Themes of 'Angels'", *The Salt Lake Tribune*, 26 November 1995, sec. E, p. 3.

9. Abbott, 15-23.

HARPER: Moroni, not Mormon, the Angel Moroni. Ask my mother-in-law when you leave the scary lady at the reception desk—if its name was Moroni, why don't they call themselves Morons . . . ?

Later in the play, when Louis finds out his new lover is a Mormon, he is incredulous:

LOUIS: But . . . A *Mormon*? You're a . . . a . . . a . . .

JOE: Mormon. Yes.

LOUIS: But you . . . *can't* be a Mormon! You're a lawyer! A *serious* lawyer!

The issue here is not so much whether these passages fully capture Kushner's depiction of Mormons in *Angels*. Nor does it matter whether viewers of the play "register Mormonism's presence . . . only as a sort of fanciful local color. . . ." ¹⁰ The fact is that hundreds of thousands will not see the play firsthand, but will rely on the interpretations of critics in the mass media for a summary as well as an opinion about the play's content and theme. Which depictions of Mormons will critics emphasize in their reviews? Which will they discard? Given that hundreds of major newspapers in the United States have published reviews of *Angels*, such questions are important to those who study the degree to which mass media perpetuates stereotypical notions of particular religious groups.

MEDIA GATEKEEPERS, ASSIMILATION, AND ACCOMMODATION

This study brings together the theoretical concepts of *religious assimilation* and *accommodation* as well as the mass communication phenomenon of *gatekeeping*. Given that mass communication researchers and sociologists of religion work in separate fields, these ideas have been studied in relative isolation with no clear bridge of understanding between them. In order to survive and flourish, all religious groups must be accommodated to some degree by the larger society, and media gatekeepers either facilitate or impede this process by providing the information upon which citizens make judgments about various religious groups. Assimilation in this sense does not necessarily imply loss of unique religious identity; it is the condition in which a group is not subordinate, but freely participates in the educational, political, and social institutions of society. Simply stated, those religious organizations that align themselves most closely with the values and norms of the host society are more likely to receive support and accommodation, while those whose

10. Michael Evenden, "Angels in a Mormon Gaze, or, Utopia, Rage *Communitas*, Dream Dialogue, and Funhouse Mirror Aesthetics," *Sunstone*, Vol. 17 (Sept, 1994): 56.

world view runs contrary to societal norms usually do not.¹¹ Gatekeepers, whether they be movie critics, editors, journalists, or television program directors, help shape the information environments out of which millions engage in everyday conversations about Catholics, Evangelicals, Fundamentalists, mainline Protestants, Mormons, and other religious organizations.

Scholars and popular writers are divided on the question of how mass media aid the acceptance of religious groups. On the one hand, Wade C. Roof¹² asserts that recent television programs, novels, and newspaper stories raise the credibility of mainstream religion by giving "serious attention to the spiritual and religious questions." On the other hand, Michael Medved,¹³ in his popular book, *Hollywood vs. America*, dedicates an entire chapter to the way religion is trivialized and degraded in movies and television programs. Similar claims are made by W. F. Fore¹⁴ and G. Lewis.¹⁵

Even though some important questions are raised by these authors, their work rarely amounts to more than personal speculation about the ability of some artistic works to undermine religious values. How, if at all, are such works filtered through media decision makers and opinion leaders to reach larger audiences? There are two channels of informational flow relative to the diffusion of information about religious groups. Popular writers often restrict their attention to the actual audience of a movie, play, novel, or television program and forget that, first, media gatekeepers and then opinion leaders interpret the work for other individuals, many of whom do not experience it firsthand. Of this *two-step flow* of information, Elihu Katz and P. Lazarsfeld assert that "ideas often seem to flow" from mass media "to opinion leaders and from them to the less active sections of the population."¹⁶ This notion has been updated by Katz and others to be a multi-step flow in which, for example, *New York Times* gatekeepers decide what they will feature, then television news

11. See Robbins, *Cults, Converts and Charisma: The Sociology of Religious Movements* (Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, 1988); also see R. Stark, "How New Religions Succeed: A Theoretical Model," in D.G. Bromley & R. E. Hammond, eds., *The Future of New Religious Movements* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1987), 11-29.

12. Wade C. Roof, "Toward the Year 2000: Reconstructions of Religious Space," *Annals of the American Academy of Social and Political Science* 527 (1993): 155-170.

13. Michael Medved, *Hollywood vs. America: Popular Culture and the War on Traditional Values* (New York: Harper Collins, 1992), 50-69.

14. W. F. Fore, *Television and Religion: The Shaping of Faith, Values and Culture* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg, 1987).

15. G. Lewis, *Telegarbage: What You Can do about Sex and Violence on TV* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1977).

16. Elihu Katz and P. Lazarsfeld, *Personal Influence: The Part Played by People in the Flow of Mass Communication* (New York: Free Press, 1956), 32.

producers use the *Times* to decide what is most newsworthy, and then the resulting television news reaches a mass audience, even though the *Times* does not. In this case, Kushner creates images and characters about Mormons in a play; critics decide whether to mention the Mormon characters and themes, which specific characters and themes to cover, and what treatment to give them. Opinion leaders interested in theater may read the reviews and then discuss them with a broader circle of friends, eventually leaving certain images of Mormons with a fairly broad audience. In this study the authors examine the types of themes and issues gatekeepers focus on when they interpret an artistic work that features a particular religious group, in this case Mormons.

Studies of “gatekeeping” focus primarily on why certain things gain entry to the mass media and why others are rejected. In a recent review of research, D. McQuail¹⁷ argues that there are several factors influencing the decisions of gatekeepers which include: (1) subjective and arbitrary judgments of writers and editors; (2) personal ideologies and opinions, including views about groups like Mormons; (3) organizational habits and routine; and (4) “news value” or the degree to which the phenomenon is perceived to be consistent with the dominant ideologies and values of the audience and/or the degree to which something is perceived as likely to be interesting to the intended audience. These comprise patterns of what gatekeepers are likely to include or exclude. For example, even though Mormons are prominently featured in *Angels*, will they be as salient or interesting to reviewers of the plays as gays or Jews, the other two main groups featured in the play? Few if any researchers have studied the output of media gatekeepers as they interpret artistic works featuring members of particular religious denominations. The following general research questions, therefore, direct the study:

1. Is it possible to identify dominant themes and patterns in the ways Mormons are discussed in newspaper reviews of Kushner’s play, *Angels in America*?
2. If so, what are the dominant themes and patterns about Mormons?
3. Given the fears of Abbott and other Mormon observers, is there a tendency by critics to focus on negative images or themes about Mormons?

At a theoretical level, all three questions address the general issue of the manner in which information about religious groups is disseminated to the larger society. By doing so, they get us beyond casual and off-

17. Dennis McQuail, *Mass Communication Theory: An Introduction*, 2nd ed. (London: Sage, 1994): 212-18.

handed claims about the way artistic works either help or hinder the assimilation process.

METHODS

The main method of this paper involves textual analysis of reviews of *Angels in America* by theater critics in major newspapers. We read and assessed 368 reviews that had appeared in various newspapers around the country and were available on Lexis-Nexis, an extensive on-line computer database. This approach may have excluded reviews which appeared in some smaller papers. We also included two recent reviews of the Salt Lake production from the two main local newspapers, *The Deseret News* and *The Salt Lake Tribune*.

As our theoretical perspective reflects, we argue that critics may function as gatekeepers for information about these plays to a reading audience that may not see them. Critics' comments about Mormons, as reflected in the plays, also may function as part of a process of image formation about Mormons for those readers. The critics serve as a second step in a multi-step flow of information about Mormons, in this case, beginning from Kushner's creations and flowing through various points until images and stereotypes reach a fairly large audience.

We realize that textual analysis, like content analysis, is very limited in its scope and generalizability. From the text, we really cannot say much about the intentions of the critics, their opinions about Mormons or the way in which these plays may have affected those opinions. We can only look at what they have published as a text which newspaper readers will read. We also cannot assume anything about how those reviews will influence readers.

We realize that media texts, like newspaper reviews of plays, have limited influence. Quantitative studies tend to emphasize the importance of the reader in selectively perceiving, remembering, and interpreting such texts.¹⁸ Qualitative studies about active audiences also tend to reinforce the view that readers are active and can agree with, negotiate, or reject meanings in such texts.¹⁹ However, such texts are part of the overall process of sense-making.²⁰ So, as readers try to make sense of the world, including such relatively low salience tasks as figuring out who

18. Jay Blumler and Elihu Katz, *The Uses of Mass Communications: Current Perspectives on Gratifications Research* (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage, 1974).

19. J. Fiske, *Television Culture* (New York: Methuen, 1987); D. Morley, *The Nationwide Audience: Structure and Decoding* (London: British Film Institute, 1980).

20. See V. R. Shield and B. Dervin, "Sense-Making in Feminist Social Science Research: A Call to Enlarge the Methodological Option of Feminist Studies," in *Women's Studies International Forum* 16, no. 1 (1993): 65-81.

Mormons are, then past or present reading of such texts may well affect their views in at least a modest way.

INTEREST IN MORMONS

Perhaps the first and most obvious finding is that most reviewers of *Angels in America* did not report anything about the Mormon themes in their reviews. Despite the prominence of Mormon characters in three principal roles, only 68 of 370 reviews mentioned Mormons at all. It seems that Mormons are not on the cognitive maps of the reviewers, certainly not as much as gay or Jewish cultures, also prominent in the play.

This is a significant example of reviewers acting as gatekeepers. Most of them acted to filter out of their reviews the fact that Mormons were a significant part of the play. In their written texts, most reviewers removed an emphasis on Mormons that Kushner intended. Several interviews with Kushner reveal that he intended from the beginning to make Mormons a significant part of the plays, even though the two female Mormon characters developed later.

Kushner told Mr. Eustis he wanted to write a play for five gay male characters, starring Roy Cohn, the Mormons and AIDS. They were sure the N.E.A. would turn the project down. When, to everyone's amazement, they got the \$57,000 grant, Mr. Kushner realized that he had proposed a play with five gay men for a theater company consisting of three straight women and one straight man. "I just had to change the story," he remembers. "That's one of the reasons why the play wound up having eight characters. There's a tremendous amount of accident in all this and that's exciting. I had to write a part for an older actress, too, and the part of Hannah"—the Mormon mother of one of the main characters—"is only there because of that. She is tremendously important to the play and so is Harper, one of the other female parts." Harper, who is married to Hannah's son, "is one of the centers of the play."²¹

While most theater critic gatekeepers screened Mormons out of their reviews, a number of them did comment on the Mormon characters and on Mormon themes. The following section discusses the themes and characterizations that the critics as gatekeepers and intermediaries in the process of image formation did pass on to their readers.

ANGELS IN AMERICA: GENERAL THEMES INVOLVING MORMONS

Need for Theories, Laws, and Rules:

One of Kushner's major themes is that the approaching of the new millennium shows the need for a grand theory or religion to guide peo-

21. Susan Cheever "An Angel Sat Down at His Table," *New York Times*, Sunday, 13 September 1992, sec.2, p. 7, Late Edition—Final.

ple. "One of the things the play is saying is that (religious) theory is incredibly important to us and that without it, we don't know where we are going," says Kushner in an interview. Most clearly, at the beginning of the second play, *Perestroika*, the Old Bolshevik character calls for a theory to guide us, "not just market incentives." Most critics seem to like the fact that Kushner addresses such issues. It also seems that several of the critics see a positive reflection on Mormonism in the fact that Kushner chose it as a religion with a theory to offer, featured with Judaism and Marxism, even though Kushner doesn't necessarily agree with any of them.

However, not all critics think Kushner deals well with such material. At least one critic finds Kushner's treatment of religion to be "thin" and "unsatisfying . . . even for atheists and agnostics in the audience." Another evident theme, noted by some critics, is that religious institutions—in this case Mormonism (and Judaism and perhaps even Marxism as a quasi-religion)—have outlived their usefulness in today's world. They see Kushner as saying that religion has always provided important guidelines for people, but religions are not keeping up with the times. Their guidelines are no longer relevant and the people who continue to try to live by their rules are "distorting themselves terribly." They "flounder for guidance" and "flout the laws."

"Millennium" is a juicy adult-themed soap opera with national (and biblical and Talmudic) scope. In a chaotic, competitive, plague-riddled world, how do you do the right thing for yourself and for your fellow man? Laws of Judaism and Mormonism, laws of the government, laws of realpolitik (where there are no laws, only winners and losers), and the laws of love are all at issue. In a panic, the characters flounder for guidance and flout the laws.²²

"I wanted to show characters struggling to maintain their belief systems," said Kushner, "even as those systems were failing to serve them as useful maps."²³

"One of the things the play is saying is that (religious) theory is incredibly important to us and that without it, we don't know where we are going," says Kushner. "On the other hand, as systematic approaches to ethics age, get passed up by history, the rules and laws which they had laid down become irrelevant and impossible and we distort ourselves terribly trying to adhere to those beliefs. It is a life and death matter to hang onto your beliefs, but it can also be a life and death matter to know when it's time to say they aren't working anymore."²⁴

22. Nelson Pressley, "Down to Earth 'Angels': Epic Takes on a Novel Look at the Kennedy Center," *The Washington Times*, 8 May 1995, Style Section, D 01.

23. Everett Evans, "Angels' Alight: Alley Stages Sweeping Epic on 1980's America," *The Houston Chronicle*, Sunday, 26 March 1995, sec. Zest, p. 8, Star edition.

24. Hilary de Vries, "A Gay Epic, Tony Kushner's Play Offers a Unique View of America," *Chicago Tribune*, Sunday, 25 April 1993, sec. 13, p. 6, final edition.

Indeed, one of the play's main themes—played out as dialectic between Judaism and Mormonism—is an examination “of how theoretical religion exists in a pluralistic society,” as one character puts it in *Perestroika*.²⁵

Most unsatisfying is Kushner's handling of religion. After divine interventions culminating in a trip to heaven by the dying Prior Walter (Stephen Spinella), we are told that angels and religions have nothing to say about life, only death and the hereafter. That is a rather small perception to serve on so expansive a platter, even for atheists and agnostics in the audience. The Los Angeles version (which Kushner labels “a mistake”) made heaven feel more comically political and Cohn, the devil on earth, seem more magically powerful. The revised *Perestroika* offers realism with less impact. Kushner even implies that Prior's fevered visions are dreams; he quotes Dorothy's words from *The Wizard of Oz* on returning to Kansas. Dreams are often sources of revelation in the Bible, but this retreat from the phantasmagorical to the everyday feels like a cheat. If Kushner means that spirituality is no substitute for clear morality and positive mental attitude, he shouldn't need the equivalent of a full working day to get that across.²⁶

Mormon Iconography and History a Major Part of U.S. Mythology:

Kushner seems to consider both Mormon history and Mormon iconography, or religious symbols, as major aspects of American culture. He gives both prominent space within the play. Kushner uses Mormon iconography, such as angels, buried prophetic books, stone spectacles for translating, and the migration west, even though he reinterprets and re-employs them for his own symbolic ends.

The general sense we gathered from the critics' reviews is that Mormons were a brave, admirable, and courageous people historically, due to the early pioneers' perilous trek across the country in search of religious freedom. Mormon history and theology are seen as mythic, part of *Angels'* “spellbinding” embrace of American legend and iconography, which also, however, includes *The Wizard of Oz*. Many Mormons may not like having Mormon history and imagery put alongside *The Wizard of Oz*.

It appears then that several of the critics see Mormon themes as aspects essentially of American popular culture, more than as reflecting a religion with a unique religious message. The use of words such as “mythology” may make Mormon readers of such criticism feel that, while critics see the early pioneers as people to be admired, the beliefs which drove them west are so much fiction.

25. Ibid.

26. William A. Henry III, *Time* 142, no. 23 (6 December 1993), U.S. edition.

And then, even more dazzlingly, come the answers, delivered in three and a half hours of spellbinding theater embracing such diverse and compelling native legends as the Army-McCarthy hearings, the Mormon iconography of Joseph Smith and the MGM film version of *The Wizard of Oz*.²⁷

Prior's searching pilgrimage is echoed throughout *Perestroika* by the Mormon, Jewish and black characters and implicitly by their pioneer, immigrant and enslaved ancestors. As Prior journeys to heaven, so the Mormon mannequins in a wagon-train diorama come magically to life; Belize is possessed by the ghosts of Abolitionist days while Louis must wrestle with his discarded Jewishness.²⁸

This is play writing with a grand design, sometimes written to excess in its wisecracks and philosophizing, but always with an effort to provide historical perspective and political punch to its narrative. In tracing the heritage and odysseys of gays and straights, Jews and Mormons, founding fathers and immigrants, Kushner bridges centuries and cultures for his 20th-century epic, and in so doing he constructs a form and creates a content that in its aspirations and achievements is [sic] rare in American drama.²⁹

But even as Mr. Kushner portrays an America of lies and cowardice to match Cohn's cynical view, he envisions another America of truth and beauty, the paradise imagined by both his Jewish and Mormon characters' ancestors as they made their crossing to the new land.³⁰

This two-part, seven-hour "gay *Fantasia*" explores the AIDS crisis, Mormon mythology and the late sleazy superlawyer Roy Cohn—with plenty of Ronald Reagan/George Bush bashing along the way.³¹

Here is the ideal heroic vessel for Mr. Kushner's unifying historical analogy, in which the modern march of gay people out of the closet is likened to the courageous migrations of turn-of-the-century Jews to America and of 19th-century Mormons across the plains.³²

Director Declan Donnellan proves as adept at integrating the play's oddball styles as he was in *Millennium Approaches*, which is revived, somewhat re-

27. Frank Rich, "Following an Angel for a Healing Vision of Heaven or Earth," *The New York Times*, Wednesday, 24 November 1993, sec. C, p. 11, late edition, final.

28. *Ibid.*

29. Richard Christiansen, chief critic, "'Millennium' Fits Times: Drama Treats AIDS, Homosexuality with Sensibility," *Chicago Tribune*, Wednesday, 5 May 1993, sec. 1, p. 30, north sports final edition.

30. Frank Rich, "Angels in America; Millennium Approaches; Embracing All Possibilities in Art and Life," *The New York Times*, Wednesday, 5 May 1993, sec. C, p. 15, late edition, final.

31. David Patrick Stearns, "Daffy and Absolutely Divine," *USA Today*, Thursday, 12 November 1992, sec. Life, p. 13D, final edition.

32. Frank Rich, "Marching Out of the Closet, Into History," *The New York Times*, Tuesday, 10 November 1992, sec. C, p. 15, late edition, final.

cast, in tandem with this new production. When it comes to clarifying its meaning, he is understandably less successful. For instance, we are presumably supposed to contrast the angel who appeared to Joseph Smith in 1830, and sent him and his Mormon followers bravely across the American wilderness, with the angel who appears here in black describing herself as a bird of prey. Each of them, we are told, is a “belief with wings and arms that can carry you.” But the demands the newer of the two is making on Prior remain inscrutable.³³

Kushner has said that the story of Joseph Smith’s revelation and the Mormon migration west “may be the greatest American story ever told.”³⁴

The Angel Moroni led Joseph Smith to the Hill Cumorah, the burial site of the plates on which the Book of Mormon was inscribed. Smith unearthed, along with the plates, “bronze bows” with stones set in them. These I take to have been Bible-era spectacles with rocks for lenses, the Urim and the Thummim. Before he became a prophet, Smith was known in upstate New York for his ability to locate buried treasure with use of “peep-stones.” These stones assisted him, as they assist Prior in *Perestroika*, in the act of translating ancient writings.³⁵

*Mormonism as “Home-Grown,” American Religion
(Mormon-Jewish similarities):*

A few of the critics reflect Kushner’s and the plays’ views of Mormonism as a home-grown American religion, which can be respected for its place in America’s history and as a major, current force as well. Mormonism is seen as the “home-grown” counterpart to Judaism, the other major religion discussed in the play.

Along with its many historic and pop-culture references (Prior quotes from films such as “Sunset Boulevard” and “The Wizard of Oz”), *Angels* is colored by Judaism and Mormonism. The Jewish and Yiddish influences come from Kushner’s Jewish-Lithuanian ancestry. But Kushner also wanted to depict the influences of a home-grown American religion—hence the presence of Mormon figures such as Joe Pitt and his mother Hannah.³⁶

The Mormons I’ve met have been both right-wing and good-hearted, and that, in my experience, is an unusual combination. Mormonism is America’s home-grown religion. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is notoriously homophobic, as bad in that regard as the Roman Catholic Church.

33. Benedict Nightengale, “Angels Lose Their Direction,” *The Times*, 22 November 1993, Monday edition.

34. Melich, “Characters and Themes.”

35. Interview with Kushner, “The Secret of Angels,” *The New York Times*, Sunday 27 March 1994, sec. 2, p. 5, late edition—final.

36. Evans, “‘Angels’ Alight.”

But I do find other aspects of Mormon theology appealing. You're judged by your deeds rather than by your intentions. That's something Mormonism and Judaism share: you have to do good to be good.³⁷

Hebrew is a language of great antiquity and mystery, and of great compression. Each letter, each word encompasses innumerable meanings, good and evil. The physical letters are themselves totems, objects of power. The Torah, the Book, is to be treated with veneration. Here is another Mormon-Jewish connection: both are People of the Book—only very different books. The aleph is the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet, the seed word, the God letter. This is why, in the play, God is referred to by the angel as “the Aleph Glyph.” The real name of God is, of course, unutterable.³⁸

Mormons Key Part of Reagan Era 1980s:

Critics note that Kushner seems to use Mormons as a key and representative aspect of the 1980s, along with AIDS, the fall of Communism, Roy Cohn-style conservatism, and crises in social institutions like marriage. The typical summary by critics of the plays' characters include several negative characteristics, describing Joe Pitt as a “tightly wound” conservative Republican allied with Cohn, and Harper as a Valium-addicted, neurotic housewife.

The reviews make a number of assumptions that ally Mormons with 1980s Reagan issues. One such assumption has to do with the rise of conservative religion (discussed further below) and the reflection of conservative religions in 1980s politics. Even though Mormons are not as visible politically as groups such as the Christian Coalition, the critics seem to agree that Mormons fit that image. Critics note the use of a Mormon couple to reflect crises in marriage and, particularly, the effect that has on Harper, who is typically summarized as a pill-popping, neurotic housewife. They also pick up on the use of Joe Pitt to reflect the contradictions between political conservatism and personal morality crises as Joe begins to come out of the closet.

When Kushner, now 35, received a commission to write a play five years ago from the small Eureka Theatre in San Francisco, he noted that he wanted to explore three matters in his drama: AIDS, Mormons, and Roy Cohn, the Red-hunting aide to Sen. Joseph McCarthy in the '50s, who had become a New York attorney of legendary evil powers by the time of his death in 1986.³⁹

37. Interview with Kushner, *New York Times*.

38. Interview with Kushner, *New York Times*.

39. Richard Christiansen, chief critic, “Angels’ Treads on ‘80s sensibilities,” *Chicago Tribune*, Friday, 13 November, 1992, sec. 5, p. 1, north sports final edition.

The play—in two parts, *Millennium Approaches* and *Perestroika*—is a seven-hour examination of Reagan-era ethics that addresses such topics as AIDS, Mormonism and the fall of Communism. Critics have hailed it as a significant step beyond the usual kitchen sink concerns of much contemporary American drama.⁴⁰

But the many fantastic flights of *Angels in America* are always tied to the real world of the mid-1980s by Kushner's principal characters, who include two young couples: a pair of gay lovers, and a politically ambitious, rectitudinously Mormon lawyer and his wife.⁴¹

Almost anything can happen as history cracks open in *Angels in America*. A Valium-addicted Washington housewife, accompanied by an imaginary travel agent resembling a jazz musician, visits a hole in the ozone layer above Antarctica. An angel crashes with an apocalyptic roar through the ceiling of a Manhattan apartment to embrace a dwindling, Christ-like man spotted with Kaposi's sarcoma. A museum diorama illustrating the frontier history of the Mormons comes to contentious life.⁴²

In his sweeping panorama of American life in Ronald Reagan's America of 1986, playwright Tony Kushner escorts us from the hypocritical centers of power to the dark recesses of a loveless marriage, from the gallows humor of an AIDS patient to the smoldering confusion of a taciturn Mormon.⁴³

As if writing in his own fever dream, Mr. Kushner brings into dramatic conjunction the America of the Reagan-Bush years, a dying Roy Cohn, some extraordinary Mormons, the ghost of Ethel Rosenberg, tales of loathsome duplicity in positions of public trust, memories of the Old Left and of the immigrant experience, with everything viewed through the prism of Prior Walter's tangled relations with his gay friends and ex-lovers. Hovering over it all are God's angels, who have become more insistently meddling since God's recent, somewhat hasty disappearance from heaven.⁴⁴

NEGATIVE IMAGES OF MORMONS

Most of the negative images were directly or indirectly related to Mormons' roles as emblematic of negative aspects of conservatism. In some cases, that is directly tied to political conservatism and the Reagan 1980s. In other cases, Mormons seem to be chosen to represent religious

40. de Vries, "A Gay Epic."

41. Frank Rich, "'Angels in America' Truly Astounding in London," *Chicago Tribune*, Friday, 6 March 1992, Chicagoland North edition.

42. Rich, "Marching Out of the Closet."

43. Steven Winn, *Chronicle* staff critic, "Marvelous 'Millennium' First Part of Kushner Opus Strives for Connections in an Alienating Era," *The San Francisco Chronicle*, Monday, 27 May 1991, sec. Daily Datebook, p. E1, final edition.

44. Vincent Canby, "Two 'Angels,' Two Journeys, In London and New York," *The New York Times*, Sunday, 30 January 1994, sec. 2, p. 5, late edition—final.

social conservatives. One critic describes the way “the Mormon couple emerges from the wreckage of their false Donna Reed life to go their separate, risky ways.”

Mormons as Politically Conservative:

The Mormon character, Joe, in particular seems to the critics to embody conservative contradictions (along with the Roy Cohn character, to which he is linked). He is usually characterized as Reaganite, Republican, and personally conservative. In Kushner’s context, the critics see those characterizations as essentially negative. Another negative is the conflict of his conservatism with his homosexuality. Another is the negative effect on his wife, Harper, who is seen as neurotic and distressed.

... a Reaganite Mormon lawyer.⁴⁵

Alternating the real and unreal, which is Kushner’s basic scheme, Part Two [*Perestroika*] then moves on to the interlocked narrative. Louis Ironson, who lived with Prior for three years then abandoned him when he got AIDS, continues his affair with Joe Pitt, a button-down Mormon Republican lawyer who has abandoned his wife, Harper. Harper, agoraphobic and delusional, is more or less looked after by her widowed mother-in-law, Hannah, who has moved to Manhattan from Salt Lake City.⁴⁶

There is Harper, the depressed agoraphobic Mormon wife with a Valium addiction, and Joe, her straight-arrow Republican lawyer husband, trying to deny his homosexuality.⁴⁷

Joe Pitt (Jeffrey King) is a young lawyer, a conservative Republican, a Mormon, an idealist and a closet homosexual. The growing emotional distance between him and his wife Harper (Cynthia Mace) has driven the fragile, agoraphobic woman to Valium-induced distraction.⁴⁸

Mormons as Straight-Laced, Moralistic, and Conservative:

Mormonism is clearly perceived by critics (and by Kushner) as a conservative religion. “Straight-laced,” “straight-arrow,” “button-down,”

45. Vit VanWagner, “Broadway Takes a Serious Look at America,” *The Toronto Star*, Saturday, November 27, 1993, sec. Arts, p. J3, final edition.

46. Kevin Kelly, “Angels’ II: Life, Death and Laughs; Kushner Completes His Stunning Epic of our Epoch,” *The Boston Globe*, Wednesday, 24 November 1993, sec. Living, p. 39, city edition.

47. Linda Winer, “Angels’ On Broadway: Good Trip From L.A.; Tony Kushner’s Play Lives Up To The Hype,” *Los Angeles Times*, Wednesday, 5 May 1993, sec. F, p. 1, home edition.

48. Greg Evans, “Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes,” *Daily Variety*, Tuesday, 10 November, 1992.

and “strict” are terms used to convey this “conservative” image. Moreover, these terms are clearly meant to be pejorative. They come up frequently in descriptions of the characters, Joe and Harper, whose personal crises, in the critics’ judgement, are only compounded by a moralizing religion. Straining to keep faith with both themselves and their church, they become implicit and explicit images of falseness and hypocrisy. One critic writes of “their false Donna Reed life.”

Joe Pitt, a strait-laced Mormon court clerk, questions his own sexual identity while his Valium-addicted wife, Harper, drifts into hallucinations.⁴⁹

Meanwhile, the tightly wound Republican Mormon attorney Joe Pitt . . .⁵⁰

Angels was not only the first gay-centered play to win the Pulitzer Prize for drama, it came to the fore just as the argument about gays in the military was putting the gay cause at center stage for the first time in U.S. history. With its aggressive scorn for Ronald Reagan and Republicanism; for Mormons and moralizing; and its demonic view of lawyer-deal maker Roy Cohn, a gay-bashing closet gay and a top-level G.O.P. influence peddler for more than three decades, *Angels* disproved truisms about the unmarketability of political drama. Instead it compellingly reasserted the theater’s place in public debate. Hearteningly to theater partisans, *Angels* generated excitement about a drama comparable to the biggest buzz about musicals.⁵¹

Kushner’s brilliance is in painting a canvas of epic strokes while hugging close to the intimate lives of his characters. Their interwoven stories revolve around the theme of awakening from denial—awakening from the ’80s. The Mormon couple emerges from the wreckage of their false Donna Reed life to go their separate, risky ways.⁵²

As showy as these performances are, they are not as effective as the solid, less flamboyant work of Jeffrey King, as the tightly wound, sexually confused Mormon attorney Joseph Pitt, and Kathleen Chalfant, whose mournful voice and slight frame are ideally suited for her dual roles as Pitt’s steely mother and the implacable ghost of Ethel Rosenberg.⁵³

Also on stage are Belize (portrayed by K. Todd Freeman, who took the title role last season in Steppenwolf Theatre’s “The Song of Jacob Zulu”), a gay black man who becomes Cohn’s private nurse in the lawyer’s final agonizing days, and a parade of male and female supporting characters portrayed

49. Ibid.

50. Steven Winn, “‘Angels’ is Born Again: Act Puts Its Own Stamp on Kushner’s Play,” *The San Francisco Chronicle*, 14 October 1994, sec. Daily Datebook, p. C1.

51. Henry III.

52. Dan Hulbert, “New York, New York! Old/New Musical ‘She Loves Me’ Tops Best of Fall List,” *The Atlanta Journal and Constitution*, 5 December 1993, sec. N, Arts, p 4.

53. Christiansen, “‘Angels’ Treads on Sensibilities.”

by two actresses—a doctor, a rabbi, an angel messenger, Pitt's strict Mormon mother, a real estate saleswoman and, in one of the play's most telling touches of fantasy, the ghost of Ethel Rosenberg, who was executed as a Russian spy in 1953 and has now come back to haunt Cohn.⁵⁴

Joe Pitt (Jeffrey King), an ambitious Republican lawyer clerking in Federal court, deserts his loyal but long-suffering wife, Harper (Cynthia Mace), once his homosexual longings overpower his rectitudinous Mormon credo.⁵⁵

Mormons as Conflicted, Neurotic:

The Mormon couple, Joe and Harper, also seems to represent what critics and Kushner see as a neurotic American society. In particular, the characterization of Harper, though often linked by critics to her Mormon religion and Joe's conservatism, is often also described as a broader representation of stressed women in American society.

Harper Pitt (Marcia Gay Harden), pill-popping housewife and devout Mormon, has recurrent nightmares that a man with a knife is out to kill her; she also has real reason to fear that the man is her husband, Joe (David Marshall Grant), an ambitious young lawyer with a dark secret and aspirations to rise high in Ed Meese's Justice Department.⁵⁶

Ms. Harden's shattered, sleepwalking housewife is pure pathos, a figure of slurred thought, voice and emotions, while Mr. Grant fully conveys the internal warfare of her husband, torn between Mormon rectitude and uncontrollable sexual heat.⁵⁷

Here is Harper, the depressed, agoraphobic Mormon wife with a Valium addiction, and Joe, her straight-arrow, Republican lawyer husband, trying to deny his homosexuality.⁵⁸

The theme of '80s denial is hammered in further as we learn that Joe, the well-scrubbed married Mormon, is in fact secretly homosexual.⁵⁹

The other pair contains Joseph Pitt, an earnest Mormon attorney and Cohn protégé whose straight-arrow exterior conceals repressed homosexuality,

54. *Ibid.*

55. Rich, "Marching Out of the Closet."

56. Rich, "Embracing All Possibilities."

57. *Ibid.*

58. Linda Winer, "Pulitzer-Winning 'Angels' Emerges From the Wings," *Newsday*, Wednesday, 5 May 1993, sec. Newspapers and Newswires, p. 63, Nassau and Suffolk edition.

59. Jacques Le Sourd, "Too Much Hype, Too Little Substance," *Gannett News Service*, Tuesday, 4 May 1993.

and Pitt's wife Harper, a Valium-popping, desperately unhappy woman who fantasizes that she is under the protection of a kind of travel agent angel who will transport her away from her troubled marriage into a clean, clear world.⁶⁰

Joe Pitt (Jeffrey King) is a young lawyer, a conservative Republican, a Mormon, an idealist and a closet homosexual. The growing emotional distance between him and his wife Harper (Cynthia Mace) has driven the fragile, agoraphobic woman to Valium-induced distraction.⁶¹

He (Roy Cohn) ends up crowing about his part in the destruction of the Rosenbergs, fighting a fraud rap in Washington, and, for reasons never satisfactorily explained, persuading a Mormon law-clerk to join him. Here is the play's second strand, and it, too, has its peppy moments. Nick Reding's uptight Utah boy is, it turns out, desperately struggling to keep himself safely shut in the sexual closet: which helps explain the woozy, half-tranquillized hysteria of his wife, Felicity Montagu.⁶²

Making Fun of Mormons: Overt Anti-Mormonism?

Mormons provide much of the comic relief in both plays. Some of the laugh lines are meant to be at least somewhat negative, reflecting such negative associations as homophobia, as when, for instance, Harper says, "My church doesn't believe in homosexuals," and Prior retorts, "My church doesn't believe in Mormons." Only one critic observed that the play made fun of Mormons, particularly of the visitors' centers, and he observed that such anti-Mormon fun was "an easy shot":

In Cohn, we get self-loathing, self-righteous confusion, repressed homophobia mixed with mad middle-class moralizing that's a plague of its own. Only a few caveats: Kushner doesn't quite fuse the forces set loose in Act I; his gays seem either victims or heroes; the anti-Mormonism is an easy shot; and, finally, I've no idea why two actresses play men's roles.⁶³

Most critics noted the humor, but didn't particularly note it as negative and did not cite the most negative examples, unless one considers the comic use of the Diorama Room at the New York Visitors' Center as negative.

60. Christiansen, "Angels' Treads on Sensibilities."

61. Greg Evans. ("A Gay Fantasia. . .")

62. Benedict Nightingale, "Aids Stretched to its Limit," *The Times*, Saturday, 25 January 1992.

63. Gerald Nachman, "On the State of Charm, Doom and Portermania," *The San Francisco Chronicle*, Sunday, 23 June 1991, sec. Sunday Datebook, p. 17.

Along the way is some devastatingly pointed hilarity in the face of disease and betrayal, much of it at the expense of the Mormons. This includes a couple of priceless scenes involving a diorama at the Visitors' Center displaying the Mormon hegira to Utah, and the depiction of heaven as a place of beauty much like San Francisco.⁶⁴

Another depicts Prior and Harper visiting the Diorama Room of the Mormon Visitors' Center in New York, where they envision the dummy of a Mormon pioneer coming to life as Joe—who is then romanced by Louis. In its way, the hilarious scene also conveys the second sight of Prior and Harper in intuiting what has happened to their ex-partners.⁶⁵

There are plenty of flashy and cheeky stage effects in "Perestroika," including Prior's fog-swirled climb to heaven on a neon ladder, an amusing bit of trompe l'oeil that blends live actors with stuffed dummies in a Mormon diorama and Jules Fisher's hellfire-and-brimstone lighting effects.⁶⁶

Designer Robin Wagner has managed to keep the dozens of scenes flowing, with special effects that are spectacular, yet with a sweetly homemade look, especially a Mormon diorama that comes hilariously to life.⁶⁷

Mormons as Homophobic:

Many critics noted Mormons being used to exemplify current institutionalized homophobia, and, in fact, Kushner has made comments to that effect in interviews. In a play which clearly fosters sympathy with the plight of gay AIDS victims, the use of Mormons as the representatives of homophobia is worrisome. Joe's mother, Hannah's, initial negative reaction to his homosexuality is often noted, although she is seen by several critics as a character who develops strong empathy later, particularly for the AID'S victim, Prior.

What would happen to Joe's old-fashioned Mormon mother, Hannah, who sold her Salt Lake City home and traveled to New York to "rescue" her son from his newly revealed sexual identity?⁶⁸

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is notoriously homophobic, as bad in that regard as the Roman Catholic Church. But I do find other as-

64. Jeremy Gerard, *Daily Variety*, Wednesday, 24 November 1993.

65. Interview with Kushner, *The New York Times*.

66. Steven Winn, "Kushner's Angelic Conclusion 'Perestroika' Completes Epic Drama," *The San Francisco Chronicle*, Wednesday, 24 November 1993, sec. Daily Datebook, p. 19, final edition.

67. Linda Winer, "'Angels' II: Still Playful and Still Profound," *Newsday*, Wednesday, 24 November 1993, sec. Newspapers and Newswires, p. 60, Nassau and city edition.

68. Everett Evans, "'Perestroika' Maintains its Brilliance," *The Houston Chronicle*, Friday, 21 April 1995, sec. Houston, p. 1, 2nd star edition.

pects of Mormon theology appealing. You're judged by your deeds rather than by your intentions. That's something Mormonism and Judaism share: you have to do good to be good.⁶⁹

Mormons as Innocent, Confused:

Rather than charging blatant homophobia, at least one critic sees Mormons as "innocent" and "confused," descriptors with both positive and negative connotations.

Nor is Joe Pitt the innocent, confused Mormon who must come to grips with his homosexuality portrayed condescendingly.⁷⁰

Mormons as Ambitious:

On the other hand, at least one critic sees Joe as implicitly or explicitly representing 1980s style ambition. While that is not necessarily a negative image to many people, the perceived consequences in this play seem negative.

Ambitious Mormon lawyer Joseph Pitt (Michael Scott Ryan) and his Valium-addicted wife Harper (Anne Darragh) are the unhappy couple seeking their destiny along separate paths.⁷¹

POSITIVE IMAGES OF MORMONS

Mormons as Conservative but Admirable, Transformed:

Not all images of Mormons as conservative are negative. In particular Joe's mother Hannah, who is portrayed negatively in her initial conservatism, is seen later to develop and to emerge as one of the more admirable characters.

Whatever one thinks of his artistry or his politics, Kushner is a great entertainer. The one-liners are hilarious. Hannah, the prim, severely-coiffed Mormon elder, who emerges as one of the play's most admirable people, asks Prior Walter, the AIDS-stricken unwilling prophet first if he is a homosexual and then if he is a hairdresser. "Well it would be your lucky day if I was."⁷²

The Mormon characters seem to show a positively perceived capacity for growth. The clearest example, as perceived by the critics, is this transformation of Hannah, but Joe and Harper are also shown as growing out of

69. Interview with Kushner, *New York Times*.

70. Jamie James, "Flying Still Higher," *The Times*, Thursday, 6 May 1993.

71. Winn, "Marvelous Millennium."

72. Ed Siegel, "'Perestroika' Caps Kushner's Tour de Force," *The Boston Globe*, Thursday, 16 March 1995, sec. Living, p. 53, city edition.

crises, even if not in ways most Mormons would find admirable: Joe, for instance, finally acknowledges and acts out his homosexuality while Harper decides to leave him and make her own independent way.

The other revelatory performance in “Perestroika” comes from Kathleen Chalfant, whose playing of multiple roles, including a brief turn as Cohn’s doctor, gives the play some of its most memorable moments. Her transformation as the Mormon mother Hannah Pitt proves one of the most humanizing touches in the play.⁷³

Chalfant opens “Perestroika” as an elderly male Bolshevik passionately denouncing the worldwide collapse of idealism, then portrays a grim Mormon matriarch who blossoms as an AIDS caregiver.⁷⁴

Kushner said he has boxes full of letters from practicing Mormons and former Mormons, people with connections to the LDS church. Most of the letters have concerned Joe. “Many are from Mormon men,” Kushner said, “who discovered their homosexuality and either left the church or left their marriage or went through an experience similar to Joe’s.” With the exception of one letter from a woman in Idaho, all have been positive. And the one negative letter turned into a positive experience. “I ended up having a very nice exchange of letters with her,” Kushner said. “We’re still in touch. She is a practicing Mormon and her concern was more with the sexual explicitness of some of the material.”⁷⁵

In this same article, Kushner discusses his first “encounter” with a Mormon named Mary, then a teenager. He describes her as “a great kid, incredibly energetic, straightforward, sincere, intelligent—characteristics I associate with Mormons.” He also remembers her LDS parents as “decent people who nevertheless opposed what I consider to be a generally progressive agenda.”⁷⁶

Mormons as Idealistic:

Some critics perceived Kushner’s Mormons, particularly Joe, as idealistic.

At the center is an idealistic young Mormon man, seduced into the dangerous orbit of 1980s power-broker Roy Cohn (the volcanic Ron Leibman), a demonic gay-baiter who in the Decade of Denial denies he has AIDS.⁷⁷

73. Malcolm Johnson, “‘Perestroika’ Concludes ‘Angels in America,’” *The Hartford Courant*, 28 November 1993, sec. Arts, p. G1, A Edition.

74. Dan Hulbert, “Broadway Drama Left to ‘Angels’ while Gurney Revisits WASP Angst,” *The Atlanta Journal and Constitution*, 17 November 1993, Sec. B, p. 11.

75. Nancy Melich, “A Look at the Characters and Themes of ‘Angels.’”

76. *Ibid.*

77. Dan Hulbert, “Autumn in New York Broadway Handicapping the Season,” *The Atlanta Journal and Constitution*, 19 September 1993, Sec. K, p. 1.

At the same time, Joe Pitt (David Marshall Grant), a promising lawyer and devout Mormon, is trying desperately to hold his marriage together.⁷⁸

Mormons as Human and Part of a Universal Community:

Many critics comment on the conclusion of the sequence in which Hannah sits in Washington Park with Prior, Louis, and Belize, now her friends and with whom she has made her peace. These wildly anti-theatrical characters have actually become a community, acknowledging one another across their differences, and not least among them the Mormon.

Consisting of a half-dozen plots that run simultaneously, the play encompasses the AIDS death of superlawyer Roy Cohn, bossy angels, a Valium-crazed woman who chews down a tree like a beaver and the breaking up and coming together of gays, Mormons, families and friends.⁷⁹

He derides individualism as outmoded and urges an ill-defined group responsibility. But one can challenge his easy assumption that Reagan and all his works have been discredited; his implicit parallel with the Soviet Union is absurd. Russia may be a land in tumult. America is a land in the midst of social tinkering and tolerance, where the old Mormon world and the, truth to tell, just as old urban Jewish gay world may not often intersect but can comfortably coexist.⁸⁰

MISUNDERSTANDING SYMBOLS

One final point to remember is that those outside Mormon culture, including the theater critics who are helping interpret the plays to a wider audience of readers, do not necessarily understand the symbols used in the same way that Mormons do. One telling example concerns the on-stage use of temple garments, which many Mormons find offensive. However, the only critic to even mention the garments simply suggests that the "Mormon's white nightgown" echoes Prior's bed sheet, an aesthetic mirroring which the critic sees as "one of many exquisite touches—as Kushner twines his two stories together."⁸¹

78. David Richards, "Visions of Heaven—and of Hell; Angels in America—An Epic, All Right, But It's the Details and Future That Count," *The New York Times*, Sunday, 16 May 1993, sec. 2, p. 1, late edition—final.

79. David Patrick Stearns, "Spirit of 'Angels' Lifts 'Perestroika,'" *USA Today*, Wednesday, 24 November 1993, sec. Life, p. 1D, final edition.

80. William A. Henry III.

81. Steven Winn, "'Angels' Gets Even Better, Broadway Production Benefits from Restaging, Recasting," *The San Francisco Chronicle*, Wednesday, 5 May 1993, sec. Daily Datebook, p. D1, final edition.

CONCLUSION

The most striking conclusion of this study is that theater critics do indeed act as gatekeepers between Tony Kushner and the reading public. The most striking evidence of this is that, despite the visibility in the plays of Mormon themes and characters and despite Kushner's stated intentions, only 68 of 370 national reviews mentioned Mormons at all. It would be interesting for further research to try to uncover why critics make such gatekeeping selections. We can speculate on the reasons for not discussing Mormons: personal ideology, lack of background or interest, focus on topical issues such as AIDS or conservative politics. We do know from earlier studies that reporters and editors tend to focus on stories that have immediacy, that are sensational to readers, that touch on issues and themes familiar to readers, that deal with cultures that are familiar to both media professionals and readers, and that are linked to famous personalities.⁸²

On the other hand, a number of critics did mention Mormons in their reviews. One of the most striking aspects of those that did was to view Mormon history and symbols as integral with American culture. Ten critics noted that Mormon symbols and mythology were important to the play and to America. One saw the play as "embracing" the Mormon "iconography of Joseph Smith" along with wildly diverse "legends" from politics and popular culture. In this context, six of the critics mentioned the Mormon migration west and three mentioned the Joseph Smith story. Five noted that Kushner had focused on Mormons and Jews in addressing the relevance of theology at the turn of the millennium. Two critics, including one who interviewed Kushner, noted Mormons as the "home-grown" American religion. All these mentions were essentially positive, although some Mormons may feel uncomfortable with the context or collateral implications.

Other themes in the reviews were more critical. Largely, these came as critics focused on Kushner's Mormons as emblematic of the Reagan era. Some of the reviews which tied Mormons to the 1980s were neutral in tone. However, most mentions of LDS ties to Reaganism were negative. And while most of the positive mentions were linked to major themes involving Mormonism, most of the negative mentions involved specific characters or characterizations. Joe Pitt was characterized by eleven reviews as "Reaganite," "conservative," "Republican," "well-scrubbed," "tightly wound," "taciturn," "straight-arrow," "sexually confused," "closet homosexual," "innocent," "confused," "idealistic," "ambitious," and "a lawyer." Harper was characterized by ten reviewers as

82. Johann Galtung and M. H. Ruge, "The Structure of Foreign News" in *Journal of Peace Research* 2 (1965): 64-69.

"fragile," "woozy," "depressed," "Valium-addicted," "pill-popping," "agoraphobic," "devout Mormon," "shattered," "sleep-walking," and "desperately unhappy." Hannah is shown by four reviewers in both positive and negative lights as "grim," "prim," "severely-coiffed," "old fashioned," but also as a "Mormon matriarch who blossoms as an AIDs caregiver."

Overall, we find a rough balance between positive and negative mentions of Mormonism from theater critics who reviewed *Angels*. So while the LDS community may have some cause to be concerned over the impression that *Angels in America* gives of Mormons, as reflected by its reviewers, the play has evoked positive acceptance of a great deal of Mormon history and imagery. The diversity of reviewers, themes, and images of Mormons cited from *Angels* shows us that we cannot assume, just from our own reading of a text like *Angels*, what the media professionals' or public's discourse about Mormons will be.

The appropriation of Mormon symbols and history into cultural productions not controlled by Mormons bothers some Mormons deeply. In a dialogue carried out on the AML e-mail distribution list, Thom Duncan⁸³ wrote:

I am angry because, frankly, it shoulda been us up there. As we left the theatre, I said to Margie, "Well, there goes any chance any Mormon playwright will ever have of telling our story on the big stage. The first time we attempt to show Joseph having his first vision, people will call it derivative of *Angels in America*. Gone forever is any chance for any faithful Mormon playwright to tell our story in a dramatic context that won't look like plagiarism. The most dramatic, mystical, and wonderful symbols we have have been usurped forever. They are no longer distinctively ours."

Scott Parkin,⁸⁴ in reply, wrote:

Just a quibble with Thom's comment that our own icons are now forever lost to us and Kushner will forever get the credit for innovating them. I disagree. Any critic who believes Kushner created the story of the first vision is dangerous to himself and others and should be ignored at all costs. Mormon symbols are no more lost to us than the menorah is lost to Jews or the cross lost to Catholics. It is unfortunate that a non-Mormon found a way to use them for commercial benefit before a Mormon did, but that neither invalidates the icons, nor makes them impossible for further use."

83. Thom Duncan, "Angry about Angels," on *aml-list@cc.weber.edu* 1995, 11 December 1995, 12:22:40.

84. Scott Parkin, "Angry about Angels," *aml-list@cc.weber.edu*, 12 December 1995, 23:18:40.

Looking at Kushner's reviewers as well as at Kushner, we find that many Mormon symbols are already in play in American popular culture, sometimes not in ways or in contexts we might have wished, but out there and visible nonetheless. It seems we ought to have more insight into this phenomenon and be able to use it better; moreover, it's clear that, if we don't, others will. We do not think anyone has pre-empted the story or symbols of Mormonism, but we do recognize that both have acquired a life of their own in the American imagination. Kushner's new layer of interpretation builds over earlier layers. In the end, we will have to deal with this popular understanding as well as with our own preferred vision.