

From out of the dark days of AIDS, a masterpiece took flight. **Angels In America** re-opens in Western Australia.

**JUST OVER** two decades ago, the AIDS crisis had reached such a critical point that education and awareness became the number one priority. And when it came to raising a public voice, there was none so great as the entertainment industry. Efforts included television movies such as *And The Band Played On* and *An Early Frost*, documentaries such as *Common Threads: Stories From The Quilt*, the Oscar-winning *Philadelphia* and even musical theatre, with *Rent*. Theatre being one of the most expressive forms of art and activism, it was no wonder to see works such as *Love! Valour! Compassion!*, *The Normal Heart* and *A Quiet End* all gaining not only critical appraisal but also the attention of mainstream audiences.

Enter *Angels In America*, hailed as one of the most important plays of the 20th Century. Written by Tony Kushner, *Angels In America: A Gay Fantasia On National Themes*, arrived in two parts: *Millennium Approaches* in 1991, and *Perestroika*, the following year.

Cleverly written with historical references, symbolism, special effects and actors in multiple roles, this epic play quickly earned wide acclaim, winning the 1993 and 1994 Tony Awards for Best Play, the 1993 Pulitzer Prize for Drama and many others. It also spawned a successful TV miniseries and an operatic production. Now, Perth's Black Swan Theatre stages a new production of *Millennium Approaches*.

Set in 1985, Prior Walter, a young gay New Yorker, is diagnosed with AIDS and abandoned by his lover. A series of strange events follow, including the vision of an angel telling Prior he is a prophet with a message for humankind. A complex story with fascinating characters intertwines in Prior's life, bringing politics, religion, philosophy and the human condition to the fore.

Kate Cherry, Artistic Director to the Black Swan Theatre since 2008, explains why the play is as relevant today as it was when it first premiered. "There is a monstrous character called Roy Cohn who is based on an actual historical figure – a Jew-hating Jew and a homosexual-hating man who had sex with other men. It links the era of tumult and confusion to the pogroms in Russia. It also looks at climate change,

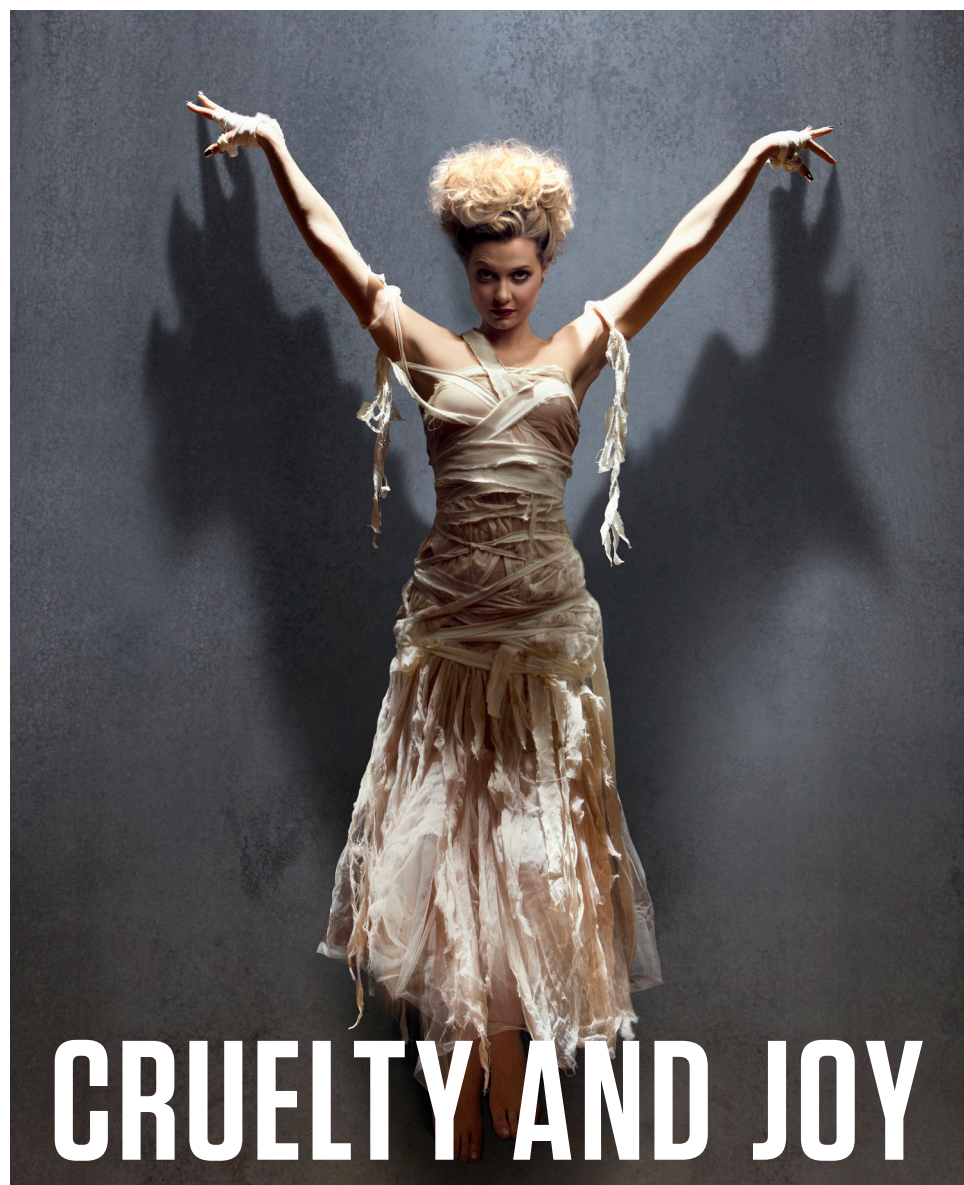


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Mormonism, being true to ourselves and looking after people who are vulnerable."

Kate also believes the play's historic elements are both edifying and insightful. "Beautiful young men were dying of a disease that nobody understood," she says. "I lived in America at the time, and so many gay men were getting sick and dying from what was a kind of plague. The next generation became more sexually cautious and a lot who had not been political became political. A whole group of young people were looking after other young people who were dying. It was a time of transition and in order to understand the cultural wars that are going on now, we need to understand the cultural wars that were going on then."

The show's cast includes Adam Booth, Stuart Halusz, Felicity McKay, Jo Morris, Will

O'Mahony, Toni Scanlan and John Stanton, while Joe Lui provides assistant direction and Lisa Scott Murphy is the director of movement.

The Swan Theatre has become renowned for its outstanding productions, including the recent *Picnic At Hanging Rock* and *Next To Normal*. The revered *Angels In America* is a worthy addition. As Cherry explains, "It is boundlessly compassionate, but is not earnest. It is strong, but does not dictate. It's political but does not prescribe. It has clarity, theatricality, surprise, cruelty and joy. It says that even in the most difficult of circumstances, we can find community and transcend pain and fear."

**MORE:** *Angels In America: Millennium Approaches* plays at the Heath Ledger Theatre until June 19.