

How Plays Adapt: The Example of Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*

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Seeing the 2018 production of Tony Kushner's *Angels in America* in Berkeley, California, and then reading the oral history of the play's production, *The World Only Spins Forward*, has caused me to reflect on definitions of "adaptation" in relationship to this play and to theatrical performance more generally. The play has evolved over thirty years, through drafts, workshops, performances, stagings in theatres all over the world, published playscripts, a film, an opera, revivals, and further revision, rewriting, reconceptualizing. It has *adapted*, in other words, in response to historical events, audience expectations, directorial ambitions, geographical location, the capacities of particular theatres, actors' bodies and abilities, and the playwright's own changing grasp of the material.

But what is the "it" that has adapted? Or would it be more accurate to say "it has *been* adapted"? And who then is responsible for these adaptive acts? Is every new *staging* an adaptation? Is every *performance* an adaptation?

A number of theater/adaptation scholars have focused their attention on the role of the audience in adapting works of drama. Nico DiCecco argues that adaptation, in a performance context, might refer not "to what cultural objects *are*, but rather to what certain audiences *do* . . . when they engage with the relationship between a work and its precursor(s)" (609). Other scholars write about the way that new productions of a play are "'haunted,' . . . by audience familiarity with the play's text [and] previous productions" (Anderson 721). Katja Krebs has noted that this sense of "ghostly return" parallels "our sense of recognition when engaging with an adaptation" (583), and Linda Hutcheon notes that for "knowing audiences," the pleasure of an adaptation is in the way the source text "oscillate[s] in our memories with what we are experiencing" (120).

But the process of adaptation begins long before a given dramatic text is performed on stage—with a script or published edition of a play. For many people, the published text is “the original,” the authoritative version by which we measure the authenticity of particular performances—or adaptations. However, as John Bryant argues, “the reality of a text is located not in its status as a thing but as an action, or rather transaction, between words and readers” (48) (and directors and)—textuality as process rather than work, something that *Angels in America* illustrates beautifully. It was first published in two volumes: Part I in 1993 and Part II in 1994. In 2013 a revised one-volume edition of the entire play was published, with significant differences. Some of these are minor, but two of the changes are substantive—reorganizing, collapsing, and expanding scenes in Part II and introducing new lines that alter the narrative arc of one character. And the story gets more complicated: the published texts provide mere snapshots of the play at two points in time, yet production histories reveal that Kushner has continually revised the play, “sometimes making major changes, sometimes tweaking only a line or two” (Afterword) and that the play has been further transformed by the directors, designers, and actors who have worked on it in dozens of productions over the years. The process of workshopping a play, the practice of dramaturgy, as Katja Krebs argues, is “fundamentally, . . . adaptation as process [and] may very well occur in most rehearsal rooms” (582).

The process of textual adaptation continues when the play is actually performed. Since its 1992 Los Angeles premiere, *Angels in America* has been staged for audiences all over the world, and each staging makes the play new again. The play means differently in a different time and place—it’s a “gay fantasia” in California, the examination of a heterosexual marriage in Denmark, and a universal love story in Japan. It’s a hopeful message of “more life” in some productions and a meditation on death in others. And these differences occur not only because words mean differently in different contexts, but as Bryant argues “because writers, editors, publishers, translators, [. . . and directors, set designers, dramaturges, actors] change those words materially. . . . Thus, a literary work invariably

evolves, by the collaborative forces of individuals and the culture, from one version to another” (4). In other words, the text adapts.

In studying the production history of *Angels in America* I’ve come to believe that “adaptation” in performance art is not a *thing* but a *process*. *Angels in America* exists in a number of different media, none of which can necessarily be identified as “original.” The authenticity of the play does not inhere in a particular product or performance but rather in the whole of its various iterations, illustrating the principles of current adaptation studies that Julie Grossman has defined: “the complex and multiple relations among texts, readers, viewers, audiences, and the cultures that influence them” (58-9). It illustrates *adaptation as process*, a process that in its resistance to boundaries, to fixedness, marks it as queer. ... But that is the subject of another paper.

Works Cited

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