

Angels in America

Storytelling has always been controversial. The reason being that there will always be someone who disagrees or does not like a specific piece of art. This can be found in forms as simple as modern cartoons, all the way to Shakespeare and Greek literature. The reason is that stories are told to an audience by an artist, actor or writer etc. What you must take into consideration is that stories are not just meant to entertain or inform but to express the thoughts and feelings of an artist. Stories are also told in different formats and they sometimes evolve or are meant to carry on an overall message that supersedes the art itself. What Tony Kushner does in his play is use social commentary, juxtaposition between heterosexual and LGBT communities, comedy and jarring content to express his message. In response to the Television Adaptation of “Angels in America”, Lee Siegel explains the faults in the play and the TV format, commenting on why he feels it fell short on the small screen. What he fails to realize is that art is interpreted differently by different people, that in itself does not determine whether something is good or bad.

Siegel views the TV adaptation as something that left him wanting more, something that fell short. The format of TV, in his opinion, is a lesser way to tell this story. I disagree with this point of view. The original play was created just after the AIDS pandemic, something that was unprecedented in our modern day society. It was not just meant to entertain but to inform and release years of pain and sexual repression by society during the previous decade. The decision to create a TV adaptation that was as close to the original play, I believe, was intentional. You are able to not only reach a larger audience with your art, but also reach people that may otherwise not be inclined to learn about the topic of AIDS or the LGBT community. Siegel comments that the characters on TV came off as one dimensional by stating “His characters constantly speak about who they are instead of letting their identities and actions speak for themselves,” (2003-2004, p. 29) but he does not seem to realize that this may be to the benefit of the overall story and audience experience.

The audience may not be informed on the subject of AIDS and it can cause a large detachment in the viewer. This however can create a safe space for them to view the story and learn while being entertained. The audience may not realize how political and disenfranchising living with AIDS can be. In the article The politics of civil society in confronting HIV/AIDS by Bill Rau he states “Family and community members normally provide the most extensive, immediate and sustained care and support for people in need. They readily identify and help respond to short-term needs,” (Rau, 2006, p. 286). The play and adaptation show how it was up to local societies to take care of each other, something that an audience could relate to in another aspect of their lives such as religion or culture. I believe that including these two aspects in the story help to tether the audience but also protect them and their values.

The story also does a great job of creating juxtaposition between characters and political points of view. The play itself was an interesting way to bard the struggles of living in a world of AIDS while simultaneously exploring the complex nature of people's beliefs, race, culture and social status. In the adaptation we see this evident during the scene where Roy has dinner with Joe while Louis is in the park having sex. The visuals are cut quickly and we can see a clear comparison between power, guilt and social status. Louis has an encounter where his partner asks "You need to be punished, boy" to which he responds "Yes I do." At the same time Roy is talking about power stating "Everyone who makes it in this world makes it because somebody older and more powerful takes an interest."(HBO, "Angels in America", 2003)

Power is something that the LGBT community struggled to have in the eighties. Siegel says that the play opened at a time when it was too late to make an impact on the reagan administration, I disagree. This was something that was created out of the desperation of personal history during a time when something like this had never happened to a specific community. It disenfranchised the LGBT community and Kushner had to experience this first hand before drawing from it to create art. He is commenting on a struggle and a community whose battles are constantly changing and mutating throughout our political history, after all the world turns in one direction.

According to Siegel the adaptation also fails because you are in a safe environment and not invested in it. He states that "Television, since you watch it in your environment, usually alone, keeps you comfortably close to your own experience, which is the relaxing value of entertainment," (2003-2004, p. 29). He seems to ignore the fact that when a subject is as controversial and as taboo as LGBT and AIDS it is something that can reach anybody. The show Queer as Folk is a prime example of how jarring, and controversial television brings attention to topics that are taboo. It dealt with topics such as Aids, Drug abuse, gay bashing and political power. Controversial topics reach people because they are interesting, regardless if it is in a theater or at home. In fact they may reach people better at home where a viewer is safe enough to entertain an idea which they may feel they cannot bring up otherwise without backlash. It is also a way to reach more people in different parts of the country, some who may not have access to theater life. One could argue that people without access to theater, are victims of thespian discrimination.

Uncomfortable topics and change are always difficult to handle. Kushner did a good job of writing something that is interesting and effective, but also digestible. When Siegel reviewed this story, he did so from an insider's point of view, which in my opinion was a mistake. When a story you are a fan of is adapted there will always be disappointment if it does not live up to your

expectations. What we must understand is that art is subjective, there is always a reason for it to exist and sometimes it is just for you to wake up and notice it.

Works Cited

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