

**SEASONS OF LOVE AND DESPERATION: THE DISMANTLING AND
ASSEMBLING OF RELATIONSHIPS IN *ANGELS IN AMERICA* AND *RENT***

Thiago Silva Sardenberg

Universidade do Estado do Rio de Janeiro

ABSTRACT: The aim of this article is to draw a comparison between two North-American plays that are set in New York at the end of the twentieth century – Tony Kushner’s *Angels in America*, in the eighties, and Jonathan Larson’s *Rent*, in the nineties – in order to look at the way through which the different, changing attitudes towards Aids affected the relationship between the characters, as they became fragmented and/ or solidified. The article also sheds light on the impact of the rise of Aids in the gay community and the winding road towards visibility and acceptance not just from society, but also one’s own.

KEYWORDS: *Angels in America*, *Rent*, North American plays, queer literature.

RESUMO: O presente artigo tem como objetivo comparar duas peças teatrais norte americanas que se passam na Nova York do final do século vinte – *Angels in America* (1993), de Tony Kushner, na década de 80, e *Rent* (1996), de Jonathan Larson, na década de 90 – a fim de observar a forma como as diferentes atitudes em relação à Aids afetavam a relação dos personagens, no que elas se fragmentavam e/ou solidificavam. O artigo lança um olhar sobre o impacto do surgimento da Aids na comunidade gay norte-americana e o tortuoso caminho percorrido em direção à visibilidade e aceitação por parte não só da sociedade como também dos próprios indivíduos.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: *Angels in America*, *Rent*, peças norte-americanas, literatura gay.

New York, early eighties. A disease affecting primarily homosexual men is recorded by the Center for Disease Control (CDC). Soon enough, *The New York Times* reports that a "New homosexual disorder worries health officials" (ALTMAN, 1982). The disease, which at the time did not have a proper name, was prematurely labeled GRID, which stood for *GayRelated Immune Deficiency*. Even though it would not be long before authorities realized that they were not dealing with a disease exclusively related to the gay community, the huge hysteria it caused took years to subsidize and for people to understand that *Aids* – a broader term accounting for *Acquired immune deficiency syndrome* – was something that everyone should be concerned with, regardless of their sexual orientation.

As for the actual individuals living with the HIV virus – which leads to *Aids* – during the time, they had to endure prejudice, segregation, and perhaps more terrifyingly, a feeling of powerlessness that arose from not knowing what was truly happening to their own bodies, as they faced the shadow that had been cast upon their hopes and dreams – that is, if they were to have a future at all.

In this article, we are going to look at unique voices of characters who were living and dealing with *Aids* in America at the time, representing people who were many times invisible and silent due to the nature of their sexual orientation and/or the fact that they were living with a stigmatized disease. In order to do so, we will be focusing on the first part of Tony Kushner's *Angels in America – Millennium Approaches* – which tackles the lives of a group of people from different sorts of socio-political (also racial, economical and sexual) backgrounds living in New York, directly or indirectly affected by *Aids*. We are also going to look at Jonathan Larson's *Rent*, which also takes place in New York but in the nineties, as a means of understanding how the attitude towards the disease progressed and how people were trying to find ways to cope with and to actually live with the disease – not just die from it.

Before dealing with the eighties specifically, it is worth for us to take a brief look back at some major historical events for the gay community in the decades leading up to the eighties, for not only is *Angels in America* a "gay fantasia on national themes" (the play's subtitle), but also because these events helped to shape the individuals we end up meeting when the play begins.

After the eruption of post World War II liberation movements from minority groups in the fifties and sixties in the United States, voice was finally being given to groups who had a history of oppression in the country – such as the African-Americans, women, and the homosexuals, for instance. A big change took place as some gay people began to view their sexuality as a political issue rather than a shameful personal secret.

Nonetheless, gay people were still ostracized and victims of violent acts, committed not only on the streets but also in the secluded gay bars, by the police, who used to raid such bars and bash them. A turning point came in 1969, with the Stonewall riot in New York, where gay people fought the police back with passionate chants of "Gay power!" and took the streets for a period of three days. Such an attitude was unprecedented: these bars were mostly shadowy places in which people came in and out without recognition; at this point, they were finally coming out of these shadows as they demanded rights.

Gay life, as a consequence, started flourishing in the seventies, with figures like Harvey Milk, who "knew that the root cause of the gay predicament was invisibility" (CLOUD, 1999) ascended to power – he was the first openly gay man elected in the public office. By no means does that imply that homosexuality was widely accepted – this "coming out" of the shadows merely meant a starting process that had strong counter-reaction from conservative and religious-based groups. Being gay meant being an outsider. Milk's assassination in the late seventies was only the beginning of the dark times gay people would have to face. The progress made in the past couple of decades took a tragic turn with the advent of Aids, and gay people had to deal with the return of past prejudices all over again as we move into the

eighties and into the background setting of *Angels in America*. Before anything, it is important to realize that the characters in *Angels in America* relate to their sexuality in highly contrasting ways, and that has mainly to do with the fact that they come from very different backgrounds themselves. While some did go by the age's politically driven rationale, consciously exercising their sexuality, others, driven by forces such as conservative upbringings or social expectations, have tried to mask their sexuality from others – and even from themselves.

That way, we cannot quite place the characters who happen to be homosexual in the play into the same box, under the same label; there is a high sense of fragmentation within this community. This fragmentation will actually be a prominent theme in the play, and will be tackled later. Considering this multiplicity of voices within the play, the way that the characters will relate to Aids will also be a reflection of the way that they deal with other layers of their identities.

Angels in America tells the story of two couples who are facing difficulties in their relationships: boyfriends Prior and Louis and the unhappily married couple Joe and Harper. The former couple's relationship comes to a decisive point as Prior reveals to Louis that he has Aids; the latter's, when Joe is offered a position in another state by his boss Roy, but his wife Harper – who struggles with anxiety and hallucinations – does not want to go. In this article, we will be focusing on Prior and Louis' relationship, but we will also mention Joe and Harper as the fates of these two couples eventually become intertwined, as a consequence of their relationships' dismantling.

Let us focus, first and foremost, on the very first time Aids is mentioned in the play.

PRIOR

“K.S., baby. Lesion number one. Lookit. The wine-dark kiss of the angel of death. (...) I'm a lessionnaire. The Foreign Lesion. The American Legion. Lesionnaire's disease. (...) Don't you think I'm handling this well? I'm going to die. (...) I can't find a way to spare you, baby. No wall like the wall of hard scientific fact” (KUSHNER, 2009, p.27).

In this scene, Prior tells Louis – with whom he has shared the previous four and a half years – that the first signs of Aids have appeared in his body: K.S, short for *Kaposi's sarcoma*, is a kind of tumor that commonly made itself apparent in Aids patients in the early eighties. Its presence automatically told the world that one was infected with the disease; Aids was written into the skin just as visibly as race.

Considering that Aids was, at the time, a GRID, it obviously meant that if you were homosexual, you were immediately out of the closet, whether you wanted or not; and, if you were not, your sexuality was promptly questioned. K.S. in those days sent people a clear warning – “back off” – since not a lot was known about it and the hysteria created around it involved rumors of transmission by merely touching or sharing glasses.

Prior's description of K.S. is also significant. He names it “the wine-dark kiss of the angel of death”. The disease at this point was a synonym of death, of dark times approaching, that were imposed on one. There was no ‘light at the end of the tunnel’, and when Prior asks Louis “Don't you think I'm handling this well? I'm going to die”, he reasserts this tragic position. Prior's play with the words “lesion”/ “legion” is a reference to the fact that he is embarking on journey to a “foreign land”, still unknown, and that he is not confident he will be able to return from it.

His partner's reaction is instant denial, and then, a breakdown when he realizes that Prior might be saying the truth after all. Prior knows Louis very well, and precisely because of that, he is not quite sure whether his partner will have what it takes to embark on such a journey with him – which of course makes the whole experience that much more frightening. Prior simply cannot hold the knowledge of the disease to himself, and decides to tell Louis about his condition immediately – even at the risk of being inappropriate, considering it was all happening during Louis's grandmother's funeral. But Prior decided to fully embrace the truth about his condition since there was no going around. Possibly, it would also mean the loss of his loved one, so he could not wait a single moment longer. He shares his truth with

Louis and begs for some real response that is not denial. After Louis tells him he cannot give it much thought due to the fact that he had to go bury his grandmother, Prior asks him “then you’ll come home?”, to which Louis replies “then I’ll come home” (id., p. 28). We can draw a line between one’s sexual identity and their attitude towards Aids, as Prior conveys the idea of being much more comfortable in his own skin and with his sexuality than Louis, who, in this very scene, admits that he “always get(s) so closey at these family things” (id., p. 25). Prior further reinforces the argument by confirming that Louis acts differently (“butch”) around his family, which is of Jewish descent. What we should not fail to notice is the fact that Louis fears being rejected by his community and family members because of his sexuality, and tries to mask it if possible. The same attitude will be echoed in his attitude towards Aids.

Another character directly dealing with Aids in *Angels in America* is Roy, a very powerful and unethical lawyer who deals with the disease in a completely different fashion. While Roy admits to having sex with men, he completely disregards the label “homosexual”.

ROY

“AIDS. Homosexual. Gay. Lesbian. You think these are names that tell you who someone sleeps with, but they don’t tell you that. (...) Homosexuals are men who in fifteen years of trying cannot get a pissant antidiscrimination bill through City Council. Homosexuals are men who know nobody and who nobody knows” (id., p. 51).

For Roy, it is crystal clear that he is not a homosexual man because there is a relation of power embedded in these ‘labels’, and, by being very powerful, he cannot identify himself as ‘homosexual’, for, in his mind, it was geared towards the weak and powerless. He would not have anyone, even the doctor who is confronting him with the scientific, medical truth, tell him otherwise. He was a heterosexual guy who happened to have casual sex with other men, period. Considering people thought of Aids still as a gay disease, he would obviously reject such ‘label’ as well, immediately replacing it by a “deadly liver cancer”. Power is the key word that “prevents” Roy from being a homosexual, according

to his own way of thinking. Labels and power aside, Roy cannot change the nature of his disease, whether homo or heterosexual, and regardless of how he decides to call it.

The character of Roy further reinforces the idea of sexual identity as related to Aids. In a continuum, Prior would be in one extreme, having completely embraced reality, however sinister it might be; Louis would be fluctuating somewhere in the middle and Roy would be on the other extreme, trying hard to neglect the disease altogether. But the reason why he wants to neglect it is because he has also completely rejected the construction of his sexual identity as a homosexual.

Moving on in the narrative, we find that Louis' predictable inability to incorporate the notion of Aids and death into his life ultimately leads him to leave Prior, exactly as the latter feared. After witnessing Prior's terrible seizure, Louis leaves him at the hospital alone and disappears for days, only returning to say that he would be moving out of the apartment – and out of his life.

PRIOR

“We have reached a verdict, your honor. This man's heart is deficient. He loves, but his love is worth nothing. (Shattered; almost pleading; trying to reach him) I'm dying! You stupid fuck! Do you know what that is! Love! Do you know what love means? We lived together fourand-a-half years, you animal, you idiot.

LOUIS

I have to find some way to save myself” (id., p.85)

However guilty Louis may feel for behaving that way, he cannot help but allow that Aids completely shatters his relationship. He breaks up with Prior, seeks other men into the night, and eventually starts a relationship with Joe, another prominent character in the play. Joe had been married to his wife Harper, but treated her as nothing more than a friend. Joe, a Republican and a Mormon, had denied his own homosexuality his whole life and had been dealing with a marriage that simply did not work.

Louis' behavior is a testimony to the strong sense of individualism that is permeated all through *Millennium Approaches*. Individualism, this unstoppable trace of character that drives people to focus exclusively on their own well-being and to disregard the others' needs altogether, can be pointed out as a contrasting force to the one of community. Since the play's very beginning, we are exposed to a series of community groups – Jews, Mormons, republicans, democrats, homosexuals, heterosexuals, HIV positive and HIV negative people – all of which are coexisting in the same place; but, as the Rabbi points out in the first scene of Act I, they are part of “melting pot where nothing melted” (id., p.16).

The Rabbi's speech is interestingly placed in the beginning of the play because it foreshadows the fragmentation we will be exposed to – not only America's fragmentation, unable to connect its different parts, but also, the fragmentation that the characters themselves would be exposed to, when faced with Aids, and breaking off a sense of community that refers to personal, strong bonds between individuals.

ROY

“Life is full of horror; nobody escapes, nobody; *save yourself*. Whatever pulls on you, whatever needs from you, *threatens you*.

Don't be afraid; people are so afraid to live in the raw wind, naked, alone... Learn at least this: *Let nothing stand in your way.*” (id.,p.64, my italics)

Roy's speech, an anthem to selfishness, is directed at Joe – who works with and is a personal friend of Roy's – and comes at a point just after he has told him about his imminent death, having a strong resonance with Joe. Soon after that, Joe finally decides to tell his mother that he is gay. He also starts thinking about his own needs, his happiness, his life; something that had always been put in the background because of his wife, his mother and his job.

For Joe, who had always annulled his sense of self, finally being able to focus on himself is actually a very big change; of course, the situation in which Roy and Louis find themselves in is quite

different, for they tended to walk over other people's needs entirely. Joe's initiative to change his life, of course, meant the dismantling of his own marriage as he moved on from his wife Harper, who suffered from hallucinations and anxiety attacks.

Kushner addresses this sense of individualism on his text "With a little help from my friends", that functions as an afterword to the play in the book edition.

"We are all children of "Song of Myself." And maybe in this spacious, under- and depopulated, as yet only lightly inscribed country, the Individual will finally expand to its unstable, insupportably swollen limits, and pop. (...) The principal subject of these plays was the painful dismantling (...) of the individual ego" (id., p.284)

The first part of *Angels in America, Millennium Approaches*, deals with the rupture of a sense of community and the dismantling of relationships; it deals with the chaos brought on by bad news and their implications in the character's lives. Even though the first part shows little signs of hope, we can notice that while Act I is titled "Bad News", the concluding act goes under "Not-Yet-Conscious, Forward Dawning". It functions as a subtle indication that the chaos which we have witnessed will eventually stop, and order will be restored.

Let us now move on a few short years in time and arrive in the New York of the nineties. In order for us to make that jump, we are going to draw some lines between *Angels in America* and Jonathan Larson's *Rent*, which also tackles the topic of Aids but in the time span of the nineties. The few years that separate both plays are enough to make up for relevant differences in tone and attitude towards Aids.

Rent is based on Puccini's *La Boheme*, and while Larson covers some of the themes and relationship patterns presented in the latter, he makes it his own contemporary piece of work by setting the action in modern New York. *Rent* is widely known for exalting 'otherness' and presenting different wakes of life within the LGBT community, making up for a healthy sense of diversity which is not just

‘accepted’, but actually, celebrated. The main characters are a large group of friends and acquaintances who are all impacted by, first, Aids – whether they are struggling with the disease themselves or they are supporting people who are dealing with it – and also, the fact that they are mostly artists struggling to make ends meet and thrive.

In *Rent*, the first explicit reference to the presence of Aids in the production is through the character Angel, an HIV positive drag queen who approaches Collins – a gay teacher – on the street, as he is hurt in the aftermath of a violent assault.

ANGEL

“Let's get a band-aid for your knee. I'll change, there's a "Life Support" meeting at nine-thirty. Yes -- this body provides a comfortable home for the Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome.

COLLINS

As does mine.” (LARSON: 1997, p.79)

Angel, offering help, openly tells Collins, who is a total stranger for him at this point, that he has got a “Life Support” meeting for Aids patients. That is, in itself, a very contrasting perspective from the one in *Angels in America*. The tone Angel implies is that of something much less unusual, or secretive; he also uses the adjective “comfortable” to describe his body, which is the polar opposite of the way Prior experiences his body after he had found out about the disease.

The very notion of a “Life Support” group made of people who are HIV+ and reunite to help one another to cope with the disease and deal with its implications is something that did not happen in the earlier days and that helped Aids patients to see and understand that they were not alone in their dramas. It is based on real-life gatherings that social-service agencies held, aimed at people dealing with HIV, as a way to share their personal experiences and talk to specialist crisis counsellors. It reinforces the idea that Aids ended up building a new sense of community amongst those who experienced it.

Angel and Collins' initial connection, which becomes a fully developed relationship as the play progresses, is actually founded on a feeling of sympathy towards the other's needs – directly contrasting the individualism that is permeated in *Millennium Approaches* – and the mutual acknowledgment of each other's condition. It is not just a matter of “I want to be with you *in spite of* your disease”, it is more towards “I want to be with you *because* I understand what you are going through”.

A sense of community is crucial in times of crisis, since the idea of being alone and also having to face a disease by oneself is a very dark one, especially considering that, most of the times, AIDS patients were rejected by their own families once they were ‘outed’ by K.S.

Without their families, they could solely rely on their partners to provide support; however, if they were to have someone like Louis as a partner, not even. The thought of dealing alone with something of this magnitude is beyond nerve-wracking, and the fact that Prior ends up being so drawn to the Voice/Angel figure, which takes his mind off of the harsh reality in which he finds himself inserted, is not only understandable but expected.

The whole scene in which Louis leaves Prior alone at the hospital and the latter is begging the former to stay with him is dramatically contrasted to Angel's final moments and death scene in *Rent*, accounted for in the musical number “Without You”, made up by all of his friends coming and going out of the hospital to visit him and take care of him, never leaving him alone, until the very end in which Angel dies at the arms of his lover, Collins.

Even if the characters in *Rent* are inserted in a context where Aids is not necessarily perceived as an unknown murderer, and access to treatment is easier than at the time of *Angels in America*, we still hear screams of desperation depicted in the play, but the characters dealing with it form such a strong bond that keeps them from falling apart, and look at the future with renewed hope.

GORDON

“I'm a New Yorker! Fear's my life! /
 Look - I find some of what you teach suspect/ Because I'm used to relying on
 intellect/ But I try to open up to what I don't know/
 Because reason says I should have died three years ago

ALL

There's only us / There's only this
 Forget regret or life is yours to miss” (id., p.88)

Perhaps, that marks one of the greatest differences in attitude between *Angels in America: Part I* and *Rent* – while in the former Aids is responsible for the dismantling of people's relationships, in the latter, it is what brings people together, it assembles them. Love and Aids do not necessarily have to exclude one another, and that is something that the new millennium was turning out to show.

While Prior screams, “I'm dying! You stupid fuck! You know what that is? Love! Do you know what love means? We lived together four-and-a-half years, you animal, you idiot” (KUSHNER, 2009, p.85), the screams we seem to hear in *Rent* are those that applaud “people living with... Not dying from disease” (LARSON, 1997, p.104)

The lines above, taken from both plays, are an attempt to reinforce the idea that in *Angels in America*, the very nature of love is questioned when you lover leaves you in a moment of difficulty. Regardless of whatever happy moments you might have shared, it can all be seen as though if it were nothing but a dream when something of this magnitude comes along and you are left deserted. Also, the prevailing word in Prior's speech is “dying”, which shows his lack of perspective for both present and future, at that moment of the play. On the other hand, the characters in *Rent* sing life in “La Vie Bohème”, an inclusive musical act that celebrates all sorts of deviation from what is considered “mainstream”, by asking the question “is anyone *in* the mainstream?” (id.). Many of these characters themselves are HIV+, but their focus is on living to the fullest, every day like it was their last, and enjoying every single moment they have.

In *Rent*, we also have the character of Roger, an ex-junkie and struggling musician that finds himself facing a creative block. His ex-girlfriend committed suicide after learning that she had not only contracted HIV, but also passed it on to him. Ever since, Roger isolated himself from others and avoided any kind of romantic connections, until Mimi comes along. She is a night performer who expresses interest in Roger, but the latter dismisses her even though the attraction is undeniable from the beginning. Their relationship can only be validated after a moment's revelation.

(Several beepers sound. Each turns off his or her beeper).

MIMI
AZT Break.

(MIMI, ROGER, ANGEL & COLLINS take pills.)

ROGER
You?

MIMI
Me. You?

ROGER
Mimi....

(They hold hands and stare into each other's eyes lovingly.)
(id.,p.104)

Once again, it is Aids that allows these two individuals to form a new relationship, attributing to seropositive people an immediate sense of community that is inclusive and understanding.

This change in attitude surely mirrors the times which the plays are portraying. If we were to look at the TV drama *Looking*, an HBO-produced series that deals with gay people's lives in San Francisco in the 2010's, we would see that the way through which Aids is dealt with is completely different from the early years of *Angels in America* or even *Rent*. HIV+ characters now have safe relationships with HIV- ones openly, and Aids is not portrayed as something that defines an individual, it is mainly

perceived as a health condition that demands treatment. The rise of PrEP (Pre-exposure prophylaxis) – medicine developed to prevent HIV infection from taking hold if one is exposed to the virus, by taking a pill a day – has also been changing the way people deal with the disease, especially in the US where its use is becoming more and more popular.

Thus, it is understandable that *Angels in America*'s epilogue, which takes place in the beginning of 1990, signals a change that was still not tangible in the eighties – a change that is realized in *Rent*. We could say that the epilogue for *Angels in America* serves as a prologue to *Rent*, as Prior prophesizes “We will be citizens. The time has come (...). You are fabulous creatures, each and every one. And I bless you: More life” (KUSHNER, 2009, p.280).

The outcasts had decided to forge a strong sense of community that was crucial in fighting for visibility and for being heard. People were just starting to be given more hope, life expectancy was increasing as effective medicines were being put out on the market, and, equally important, people decided to make the most of life, celebrating the bonds that are formed in difficult situations – for these are the solid bonds that truly last and make a difference.

REFERENCES

ALTMAN, L.K. New homosexual disorder worries health officials. **The New York Times**. Disponível em <<http://www.nytimes.com/1982/05/11/science/new-homosexual-disorder-worrieshealthofficials.html?pagewanted=all>>. Acessado em 30 de Abril de 2016.

CLOUD, J. The pioneer Harvey Milk. **Time Magazine**. Disponível em <<http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,991276,00.html>> Acessado em 30 de Abril de 2016.

KUSHNER, T. **Angels in America, Part I: Millennium Approaches**. New York: TCG, 2009.

LARSON, J. **Rent**. New York: Rob Weisbach Books, 1997.

Recebido em: 18/06/2016

Aceito em: 17/09/2016