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Theater as National Memorial:
How *Angels in America* Remembers

by

Alice Endo
Class of 2022

A critical essay submitted to the
faculty of Macalester College
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
Degree of Bachelor of Arts
with Departmental Honors in Theater and Dance

Honors Advisor: Mina Kinukawa

Introduction

Public memorials are valuable sites for understanding national identity and collective memory. By offering spaces for reflection, loss, and grief, they validate and give physical form to the individual experiences of their visitors. Memorials are never neutral, however, in the sense that they always have a narrative. They affect the public that visits them, reframing their visitors' individual experiences in the larger scope of history. Writing or speech can communicate history, but these are far from being the only avenues through which the past reaches us. History communicates aesthetically and emotionally: it can be experienced as much as it is learned. Powerful public memorials are effective in great part because of their visual and emotional dimensions.

In this honors essay, I am interested in looking back on the fall 2021 production of *Angels in America: Millennium Approaches* directed by Faye Price '77 for the Theater and Dance department at Macalester College. I believe it served as a kind of public memorial. To explore this idea, I will compare this production to a national memorial that continues to evoke a strong reaction from the public: the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C. I hope to better understand how these seemingly very different memorials operate by interpreting them through the lens of scenography. Analyzing these two objects together illuminates the connections between physical memorials and representations of history in performance. From this analysis, I hope to better understand how memorials function and how scenographic techniques are central to their power.

A Scenographic Approach: Rachel Hann and *Beyond Scenography*

I will draw from the work of Rachel Hann and her book of scenographic theory *Beyond Scenography* to frame my discussion of memorials. Hann's book has been an immensely helpful resource in thinking about what scenography *is* as an art form, and how it works. Hann follows a lineage of performance theorists, including Edward Gordon Craig, Adolphe Appia, and Josef Svoboda, who push theater academics and practitioners to take scenography's central role in performance more seriously. In 1908, Craig proclaimed that theater would remain restricted in its focus "until the painter shows a little more fight."¹ He was reacting to the historical hierarchy of importance in Western theater: the author as the master artist whose work is executed by artisans in a series of less and less prestigious roles. In North American theater in particular, the view that design is secondary to text and its interpretation still predominates. Hann challenges this view by highlighting how scenography works with text rather than following it. Specifically, Hann argues that scenography is part of a trio of sub-disciplines that work together to make performance happen. She explains "the challenge is to argue why scenography is to staging as choreography is to movement, as dramaturgy is to sequencing."² Hann locates scenography within the framework of performance studies, making a compelling argument for its prime place in this discipline.

Hann worries that expanding the domain of scenography as a framework could dilute the usefulness of the word "scenography" itself—"that scenography [would lose] its distinctiveness before that distinctiveness has been appropriately accounted for within

1. Craig, quoted in Hann, *Beyond Scenography* (London: Routledge, 2018), 27.

2. Hann, 35.

academic circles.”³ She foresees a problem like that which afflicts the meaning of the term “performative,” which is often used simply to mean “performance-like” and has in many cases become a shallow, non-specific word for describing anything which bears any resemblance to theater. To avoid this pitfall, Hann argues for an investigation of what scenography *does* rather than what it *is*.⁴ Specifically, she splits scenography into two separate definitions: “scenography,” which she identifies as “a crafting,” from “scenographic traits” which she identifies as “orientating.”⁵ Scenography is a holistic approach to making performance. In its most general sense, it simply means the practice of staging scenes. Scenographic traits are “strategies for worlding,” or elements of a work that cohere into an intelligible whole. Hann breaks this category down along the lines of traditional theatrical design disciplines (lights, sound, scenery, props, and costumes), but scenographic traits are not limited to these specific elements.

Her approach is encapsulated in a quote from the introduction to *Beyond*

Scenography:

I argue that scenography sustains a feeling of the beyond where the crafting of a “scene”—inclusive of the orientating qualities of light and sound as well as costume and scenery—encompasses a range of distinct methods for atmospheric transformation that score how encounters of “world” are conceptualized and rendered attentive.⁶

To break this crucial quote down, we start with scenography. We approach our object of study (be it theater, dance, visual art, architecture, etc.) as a *scene that has been crafted*.

3. Hann, 26.

4. Hann, 27.

5. Hann, 24.

6. Hann, 16.

The term “scenography” addresses the crafting of these scenes. In order to analyze these “scenes,” we pay attention to their scenographic traits, which in the theater are often broken down as light, sound, costumes, props, and scenery. These traits, which are understood as strategies of orientation, are considered “methods of atmospheric transformation.”⁷ This means that they intervene in existing space, whether it is geographical or metaphorical. So, then, what do these strategies of orientation do? This is the opaquest, but most potentially useful part of this quote for me. Hann posits that these scenographic traits “score how encounters of ‘world’ are conceptualized and rendered attentive.”⁸

Anthropologist Kathleen Stewart defines worlding as “the ways in which an assemblage of elements comes to hang together as a thing that has qualities, sensory aesthetics and lines of force...”⁹ Hann uses the term “worlding” or the phrase “encounters of world” to establish that scenographers are in the business of creating worlds. In her essay “EF’s Visit to a Small Planet,” Elinor Fuchs frames the experience of reading a play as exactly that. She encourages those of us experiencing a play for the first time, to think of ourselves as adventurers setting foot on an alien land. Her approach has much in common with Hann’s. Fuchs tells us:

A play is not a flat work of literature, not a description in poetry of another world, but is in itself another world passing before you in time and space. Language is only one part of this world. Those who think too exclusively in terms of language find it hard to read plays. When you “see” this other world, when you experience

7. Hann, 16.

8. Hann, 16.

9. Stewart, quoted in Hann, 16.

its space-time dynamics, its architectonics, then you can figure out the role of language in it.¹⁰

This statement parallels Hann's argument about scenography's key role in theater, and in any physical art form that can be understood as an "encounter of world." Fuchs distinguishes plays from poetry, or pure language, which she describes as flat. There is something inherent, Fuchs argues, in the form of theater (in its existence in three-dimensional space, its inclusion of multiple sensory forms of information) that separates it from literature. Plays become their own worlds, with their own internal logic. Hann goes one step further, identifying these elements that differentiate plays from poetry as scenographic strategies. Staging theater is world-building because of its visual/spatial elements—in other words, because of scenography.

It is easier to understand this theory if we apply it to a play. Fuchs provides students with a road map for experiencing plays, while Hann critiques an academic discourse around plays to highlight the role of scenography—both develop their argument taking a play as a point of departure. For the purposes of my discussion, I take as an example *Angels in America*, a play that I will return in detail to later. To state the obvious: *Angels* is a play, in that it began life as a written text, and then was staged in multiple theaters on opposite coasts of the United States in productions where actors spoke the text wearing costumes, under lights and in front of scenery, surrounded by sound designed to create a world inspired by the text and consistent with the playwright's

10. Elinor Fuchs, "EF's Visit to a Small Planet: Some Questions to Ask a Play," *Theater* 34, (2004): 4-9.

vision. *Angels in America* is not the text, not “merely” the poetry in Tony Kushner’s manuscript: it lives on stage, live, as it is performed and experienced by an audience. Hann would describe this audience’s experience as an “encounter of world.” All of these points seem self-explanatory to people embedded in the theater; regardless, it is important to begin my discussion of worlding and scenography here.

I interpret Hann’s and Fuchs’s views in conjunction to argue that it is the scenographic dimension of theater that makes it an encounter with a world. Accepting this, as Svoboda and Craig and Appia and many others have argued, would necessitate a revised perception of the importance of scenography in our conception of the theater. This position has other implications: most importantly for this essay, approaching the analysis of theater from this angle encourages a focus on the practical details of a production, especially those that Hann defines as scenographic traits. This lens also emphasizes the audience’s reception of a performance experience, whether that emerges a traditional theater production or a work of architecture.

Though they are grounded in the traditions of the theater world, Hann’s strategies of analysis do not only apply to plays and the stage. In this essay, I am interested in bringing Hann’s ideas about scenography to bear on public memorials, and in arguing that performance can serve a similar function to memorials by leaning on shared scenographic strategies. Because of this, scenographers (a category which includes theater designers, as well as architects, choreographers, urban planners, and more) have the potential to learn from each other and share strategies for restructuring how we understand ourselves in the context of our community—because this is what public memorials necessarily do.

Lessons from the Vietnam Veterans Memorial

The next step in making this case is to discuss public memorials. I want to start by examining “the public memorial” as an object: what makes something a memorial? What makes it public, and who is that public? How do the scenographic qualities of a public memorial interact with its audience, and how do these interactions constitute the “effect” of the memorial? We can understand a memorial as a collection of small design “choices” that together produce a certain kind of memory of an event, or a person. To understand what a memorial is really commemorating, we should zoom in to its detail and examine what Hann would call its scenographic strategies. To begin looking into these questions, I turn to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial as a case study.

Located on the National Mall in Washington, D.C., the development and history of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial are famously controversial. Of course, such controversy stems from the war which the Memorial commemorates and its complicated legacy in the mainstream American imaginary. The Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund’s history of the wall is a useful resource because it narrates the memorial’s design process from start to finish, bringing to light details that a different framing of the history might leave out. The VVMF website includes the deliberations between architect Maya Lin and the design firm over the font, and the font size.¹¹ These details matter! The half-inch font size that the design team selected makes the experience of visiting the memorial similar to reading a book, physically encouraging viewers to step closer to the memorial. In this

11. Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund, “History of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial,” last modified January 27, 2020, <https://www.vvmf.org/About-The-Wall/history-of-the-vietnam-veterans-memorial/>.

way, finding a name amidst a mass of names becomes an intimate experience for the “audience” in a way that a different font size would not. It is in these moments in a design process that the subtleties of a work are fleshed out to form the whole of the work of art, whether this work is a college theater performance or a national memorial meant to stand for all time.

To create the memorial, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund brought together a panel of jurors to judge a competition open to any American citizen over the age of 18. The winning design was one of the simplest: a path leading below ground level alongside two long, black walls set at an angle, each inscribed with a list that named the war’s dead and missing American soldiers. The designer was Maya Lin, an undergraduate architecture student at Yale University. That she was a woman, that she was Asian American, and that she was just 21 all contributed to the negative reaction against her design from a segment of the public. The controversy around Lin’s design, however, was equally as much because it eschewed many of the expectations of what war memorials should look like. Some saw Lin’s use of black granite as a signal for national shame, and that interpretation was also true for Lin’s decision to place the Memorial below ground level. The lack of ornamentation, too, was shocking to many viewers. Others in the Memorial’s intended public—the American people and veterans, specifically those who had fought the war in Vietnam—saw Lin’s rupture from the aesthetic traditions of war commemorations as disrespectful. Said one critic, veteran and lawyer Tom Carhart: “One

needs no artistic education to see this design for what it is, a black trench that scars the Mall. Black walls, the universal color of shame and sorrow and degradation.”¹²

Lin’s vision and intent for the Memorial and the negative reaction against it centered equally on the monument’s scenography. Lin chose the angled, sub-ground level shape with the intention to create “a park within a park—a quiet protected place unto itself.”¹³ She chose the polished black granite for its reflective qualities, like a mirror reflecting mourners, tourists, and the National Mall behind them. These qualities “score” the “encounter with world” of the Mall, and more specifically the Memorial. Lin chose them with care towards the viewer experience, constructing an all-encompassing “performance” by the Memorial. The Memorial goes beyond representing the American soldiers who died in Vietnam—representation is too flat a word to fully describe its effect. The Memorial acts on the world as it scores it. It creates a park within a park—a little world within the bigger, also staged world of the National Mall. It acts on the Mall, and on any ideas about the war brought by its spectators, and on America. It creates an experience for the viewer, the architecture itself performing for them. Its design stages a scene, even something Fuchs might see as “a small planet,” by employing the strategies of scenography via what Hann names “scenographic traits” to *do something* to the memories of this event in American history.

The Memorial’s scenographic traits were central to the debates that surrounded it. Carhart’s comment that the Memorial symbolizes shame, sorrow and degradation attests to the power of these scenographic details. To him, a war memorial likely meant white

12. Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund.

13. Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund.

stone, inscribed with quotes from presidents, perhaps fountains, certainly a shape that juts upwards into the sky rather than reaching down into the earth. A quick glance around the rest of the National Mall confirms that these aesthetic qualities are powerful norms.

Architectural historian Jeffrey Karl Ochsner provides insightful analysis of the Memorial's scenography when he observes that "the Vietnam Veterans Memorial is essentially incomplete without human participation."¹⁴ Ochsner interprets the Memorial as both a "space of absence" and a "linking object."¹⁵ He makes the case that the scenographic details of the wall are key to these functions. Ochsner quotes Richard Etlin in defining a space of absence as "a void in which we have the simultaneous experience of both the absence and the presence of the dead."¹⁶ He borrows the term "linking object" from the work of psychologist Vamik Volkan, though he notes that Volkan might object to his use of the phrase in this way. To explain this phenomenon, Ochsner employs a psychological reading of how memorials work.

Ochsner claims that, from the time human beings are babies, symbolization is key to our emotional lives. It is a response to the incomprehensible, since to an infant the unseen object is not just not present, but nonexistent. Death and other incomprehensible losses, Ochsner believes, return us to this state of object impermanence. In response, we create objects which are linked to those we have lost as permanent markers, ways to give form to our experience of loss and to give material permanence to the deceased. Our

14. Jeffrey Karl Ochsner, "A Space of Loss: The Vietnam Veterans Memorial," *Journal of Architectural Education* (1984-) 50, no. 3 (1997): 156–71, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1425468>.

15. Ochsner, 156.

16. Ochsner, 156.

ability to make associations, or to symbolize, allows these linking objects to be powerful. Ochsner explains: “It is because we can associate the name of the deceased with his or her life and with his or her interaction with us that the name can serve to evoke our internal feelings connected with the deceased.”¹⁷ He concludes, simply: “Symbolization is an essential component of memory.”¹⁸ Memorials, then, are linking objects at once personal and collective: linking and producing public memory.

Ochsner quotes Slavoj Žižek’s idea of “the living dead” as the deceased who cannot find their place in symbolic tradition and thus return to haunt the living. Žižek cites the victims of the gulag and the Holocaust as twentieth century “living dead” who will “continue to haunt us until we give them a decent burial, until we integrate the trauma of their death into our historical memory.”¹⁹ Ochsner makes the case that the American dead in Vietnam hold a similar place in the collective memory of the United States. The memorial, then, is an attempt to give them a proper burial.

In explaining how the Vietnam Veterans Memorial functions as a linking object, Ochsner highlights its designed qualities, otherwise known as its scenographic traits. This passage provides an example:

One can come upon it almost without warning and then be led into its space. Because the path along the wall is paved only to a width of ten feet, one walks along the memorial, experiencing it sequentially and taking in the names only gradually. As the path descends, the number of names grows, however. For each visitor, there seems to be a point at which the immensity of more than fifty-eight

17. Ochsner, 158.

18. Ochsner, 158.

19. Žižek, quoted in Ochsner, 160.

thousand names becomes apparent. Suddenly, it seems that the distant abstraction of so many dead and missing has become very real.²⁰

Ochsner does not describe the wall from a detached perspective. Instead, he describes the experience of being in the space. Additionally, the historian highlights how the designed qualities of the space encourage a certain kind of action. The only ten feet wide, so people walk *along* the wall and *down into* the memorial rather than up to it. Elsewhere in his essay, Ochsner identifies the size of the font, the organizational scheme (by date of death solely rather than in total alphabetical order, or grouped according to military rank and position), and the black, reflective surface for their roles in producing the wall's performance. Together, these elements constitute the audience's encounter with the wall.

Ochsner asks why some objects “work” as spaces of absence and linking objects while others do not. To expand on his question, I ask: what scenographic strategies can create a space where memorialization can happen? Ochsner highlights the importance of incompleteness in memorial sites. Rather than focus on them as empty spaces (a common critique of the Memorial when the design was initially made public),²¹ it is more useful to frame them as spaces that “can evoke (unconscious) human projection.”²² “Linking objects,” Ochsner says, “cannot be overdetermined... they must leave ‘space’ into which projection can occur.”²³

20. Ochsner, 161.

21. Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund.

22. Ochsner, 163.

23. Ochsner, 163.

The Vietnam Veterans Memorial leaves space through its abstraction. The Memorial's design contest included a stipulation that proposals must not have a political agenda. Though in my opinion it is impossible to meet such a request, the memorial designed by Maya Lin does not declare its stance on the war; instead, it creates a space for reflection. It guides visitors down a relatively narrow path into the earth. You walk along the wall, and as you do, you begin to see the names. They are not organized by military rank—as most war memorials are—but by date of death. As you walk along the wall, days pass, and then months, and then years. Ochsner highlights the moment “at which the immensity of more than fifty-eight thousand names becomes apparent.”²⁴ The black, polished granite reflects the image of the visitors back to them, as well as the Mall behind them, but, as Ochsner rightly points out, the reflection appears as a foggy window rather than a mirror. In the darkness of the granite, shapes are present but not quite defined, less light bounces back at the viewer, and the names of the dead appear to float between you and your reflected image. Ochsner notes that the names themselves often catch the interest of the visitor, even for the many who do not go to honor a specific loved one since the format of this somber list highlights that the names are “quirky, as names often are.”²⁵ The half-inch high font size and sharp edges of the sandblasted script draw you closer to the wall, enticing you to run your finger along the names, pondering the individual human life each engraving represents.

These are all designed elements—or scenographic strategies. As in a set, the choice to use black stone as a material is a design choice both in its departure from the

24. Ochsner, 161.

25. Ochsner, 161.

aesthetic norms for a monument as well as in its ability to reflect just the right amount of light. The width of the path, the size of the font, the orientation of the arms so that one walks from the Lincoln Memorial down, and then back up towards the Washington Monument: these are all strategies for constructing a reflective world, a space with enough ambiguity for projection to occur—a linking object. These design choices are not incidental to how the Memorial is perceived, as evidenced by reactions like Tom Carhart's. Rather, they are central to understanding how the Memorial functions. Further, the intensity of the controversy surrounding the Memorial attests to the powerful role linking objects, including public memorials, play in human societies.

Angels In America: Representing A History of Crisis

The analysis of this famous, effective memorial gives us many fruitful threads to follow as I examine how memorials function. As my discussion moves away from the Vietnam Veterans Memorial and back into the world of the theater, I ask the question: can a play be a memorial? How can plays share strategies with public, architectural memorials? I turn to analyzing *Angels in America* as the kind of “world” that Hann and Fuchs describe in the Theater and Dance Department at Macalester College's 2021 production of Kushner's play. In order to understand how our production of *Angels in America* worked—or did not work—as a memorial, my process of analyzing the show will parallel the process of producing it. I will walk through a few of the rich and varied ways in which the text prompts those bringing it to the stage, and then move into how the audience experiences a production of the play. As I conclude this section, I will circle

back to my discussion of memorials and the Vietnam Veterans Memorial to consider if and how *Angels in America* memorializes history.

The Space of *Angels*

The text of *Angels in America* confronts its would-be producers with a variety of problems, both practical and thematic. Arnold Aronson mulls over some of these problems from the perspective of a designer. He identifies that a primary challenge for every production of this play must be how to deal with the sixty scene changes contained within the play's two parts. They must not be disruptive or time-consuming, he instructs us, instead "they must flow with the ineluctable logic and fluidity of a dream."²⁶ But are they a dream? If so, whose? How do we best understand the narrative structure of *Angels in America*? Quickly, practical considerations collide with more philosophical questions about what exactly this play is. Aronson considers productions that interpret the structure as Shakespearean, Brechtian, episodic recalling the theater of medieval Europe, or perhaps as cinematic: a montage of jump cuts and cross fades between various scenes. Aronson convincingly argues that however a production chooses to interpret this narrative structure, scenography is essential to how it functions.

To clarify this question of structure, Aronson uses a somewhat surprising metaphor. He identifies the basic structure of *Angels* as "hypertext," referencing the way that "key words or images can transport us from one locale to another, from one world to

26. Arnold Aronson, "Design for *Angels in America*: Envisioning the Millennium," in *Looking into the Abyss: Essays on Scenography*, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005), 182.

another.”²⁷ He argues that in productions which solve the scene change problem by having multiple scenes onstage at once “this layering of scenes and transpositions of characters resemble “windows” on a computer screen: multiple locations, some hidden behind others, but any one available to foreground at any moment and in any sequence.”²⁸ This metaphor describes *Angels in America*’s slipperiness of location with remarkable subtlety. Kushner’s play does not smoothly cross-fade between a variety of locations like film and television. It prompts those staging it to approach these transitions more creatively. The text’s intentionality towards how scenes begin and end, and the playwright’s extensive notes on visual style ask for more attention to be paid to the layering of these scenes and the connections between them. The hypertext analogy foregrounds the importance of these connections themselves in establishing the broader “space” in which the play unfolds.

The visual style of the play is key to establishing this sort of space. Kushner gives us strong instructions as to this style in his notes:

The plays benefit from a pared-down style of presentation, with scenery kept to an evocative and informative minimum. There are a lot of scenes and a lot of locations; an informative minimum means providing what’s needed to enable the audience to know, as quickly as possible, where a scene is set... I recommend rapid scene shifts (no blackouts!), employing the cast as well as stagehands in shifting the scene. This must be an actor-driven event.²⁹

27. Aronson, 190.

28. Aronson, 191.

29. Tony Kushner, *Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes* (New York: Theater Communications Group, 1992), 312.

This is at once a very specific and incredibly vague description of what our play will look like. Or perhaps, it tells us less about the aesthetic of the play and more about the logic of the space in which the play lives. Kushner defines the role of each location's specific scenery as the minimum required to quickly signal to the audience where a scene is set. In other words, these furniture props—the park bench, hospital bed, desk, and so forth—serve an iconic function. Rather than representing the individual nuances of Roy Cohn's law office, for instance, Kushner is asking the desk to represent the *idea* of the office of a powerful man. Placing several of these iconic furniture pieces onstage at once draws attention to the broader space of the play: what is this world in which so many specific locations emerge and disappear?

Michel Foucault defines a heterotopia as something that “has the power of juxtaposing in a single real place different spaces and locations that are incompatible with each other.”³⁰ He says that we live in “the epoch of space,” by which he means space as it is socially constructed and understood. Heterotopias, then, have the power to bend the fabric of social space by bringing together incompatible locations. Aronson suggests that the theater is a perfect example of a heterotopia, in that it is a single real space that holds within it multiple places. If plays are small planets, then a production of *Angels in America* is a deeply heterotopic world in the way it brings together a variety of meaning-laden spaces (both real and imagined) that exist within American society. The list of *Angels in America*'s many locations includes hospital rooms, court rooms, bedrooms,

30. Michel Foucault, “Of Other Spaces,” trans. Jay Miskowiec, *Diacritics* 16, no. 1 (1986): 25, <https://doi.org/10.2307/464648>.

bathrooms, fancy restaurants, cheap coffee shops, cemeteries, places of worship, abandoned city lots, park benches, phone booths, dreamscapes, Antarctica, Heaven... It is a pretty amazing list, all told, and one that points to the sweeping quality of this play's ambition to represent American life.

In the play's stage directions, Kushner suggests that representative furniture pieces or objects signal a given place. These serve as symbols, representing in a single image the necessary context of each scene's setting and, by extension, the characters who inhabit it. There is a double awareness of location within this spare visual aesthetic: each scene takes place in its specific setting—usually represented by a piece of furniture and filled out with costumes, light, sound, and a few props—but the dominant visual element of every scene is the set. For this reason, the audience must also interpret each scene within the broader space of the play's world.

My set for the 2021 Theater and Dance Department at Macalester College's production drew heavily from the neoclassical style of many of the United States' national monuments. The sandstone wall was inspired by the original columns of the US capitol, while the grey and white marble floor resembled the Lincoln Memorial. Though borrowing from their style, I did not design a set that too closely resembled any one of its inspirations—this is in large part because the set's arches, cornices, and columns were significantly less ornate than most actual examples of neoclassical architecture. I was heavily influenced by the designs and philosophy of Adolphe Appia, an artist known for his brutally powerful use of simple geometric forms: I designed a set that consisted of a white wall with two tall, open arches set at a diagonal with the audience, and downstage of the wall a deck with several levels. In the case of the set that I created for *Angels in*

America, the effect of such minimalist lines was to avoid making any of the buildings that inspired me recognizable. Rather than resembling any one famous building, the set hinted at a more abstracted idea of America.

The sight of one long, shallow deck pointing diagonally through space presented the stage as a blank slate. The deck is painted a light grey marble and the wall a warm sandstone, but in the dark of the theater they both glow white. Following Kushner's suggestion, I communicated the play's locations through a series of furniture pieces and preserved the set's omnipresence by using a light value in the paint treatment to make it visible from the audience's entrance to curtain call. The production's low, atmospheric lighting bounced very little illumination on the black drapes that encircled the white stage. As a result, the play appeared to exist in a luminous world surrounded by void. This world was the second layer on which the action unfolded.

The set provided numerous spaces for actors to take a scene, each with subtly different dynamics, but without providing much more information than the bare minimum. The combination of the minimal furniture props and this set means that audiences perceive the play through a double awareness: every scene takes place in both a specific location and a generalized America. Sometimes in the play, Kushner plays this double awareness for dramatic irony. In Act I, Harper turns to Joe and exclaims, "I don't want to move to Washington! It's a giant cemetery, huge white graves and mausoleums everywhere."³¹ Harper believes that she is in her apartment in Brooklyn when she speaks this line, but the audience sees the character amidst a world of neoclassical columns,

31. Kushner, 23.

arches, and marble floors that appear very similar to the city she is decrying. Harper does not want to move to Washington, but we see that her world is already what she fears: her world is America. Later in *Millennium Approaches* when Louis rants to a quietly seething Belize about the nature of American democracy, he states that there are “no angels in America.”³² The irony of this statement is obvious to every viewer who reads the words “Angels in America” printed on the first page of their program. Beyond this, though, Louis’s idea that America is a blank slate free of national mythologies and ancient histories is directly refuted by the set that stands behind him.

In addition to the set’s omnipresence, the audience’s double awareness of the play as a stage performance is informed by the execution of the play’s scene shifts and its many moments of magic. Kushner’s instruction “no blackouts!” is on one level practical: blackouts, like long scene changes, will drag down the pace of the performance and give audiences an opportunity to nod off in the middle of this marathon play. But, to return to Foucault’s term, Kushner’s instruction in his playwright’s notes of “letting the wires show”³³ also emphasizes the heterotopic nature of this play’s world. Making the reality of the theater obvious to the audience does not take away from the power of the play’s most theatrical, supernatural moments. The fact that the wires are showing is not Brechtian alienation or post-modern detachment: instead, the gesture of revealing the making of the theatrical moment is deeply genuine. At the same time as this stage magic aims to awe its audience, the sight of wires engenders an awareness of the work of scenography—and theatricality—to bring the play’s dramatic and physical realities together. They come

32. Kushner, 96.

33. Kushner, 313.

together in a space both physical and mythical: a heterotopia which is also a utopia, a single location which is also no-place; a transparently real room in the theater which holds within it a mythological America.

Angels in Historical Time

The text of *Angels in America* also prompts us to regard history and how it unfolds through time. Even in 1992, *Angels in America* was a play that looked backwards. Its action takes place entirely during a period of four months in 1985-86, with an epilogue set in 1990. Though the AIDS epidemic was still far from over at the time of its 1991 premiere, *Angels in America* does not have the urgent, activist stance that characterized much of gay theater from a half-generation earlier. The play rather intentionally positions its characters in a New York City before ACT UP's founding in 1987 and before the FDA approval of the treatment drug AZT in the same year.³⁴ Despite the centrality of AIDS to the play's storylines, none of the characters are involved in anything that could be called an activist response to the crisis. It is a decidedly individualistic framing of AIDS history, perhaps because it is not an AIDS play so much as a play that uses the crisis of AIDS as a point of departure to engage broader questions. While the play takes care to depict and memorialize this time of deep pain within the gay community and in the country's history, *Angels in America* is more concerned with the place of the 1980s in a much longer historical trajectory.

34. James Miller, "Heavenquake: Queer Analogies in Kushner's America," in *Approaching the Millennium: Essays on Angels in America*, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 62.

Millennium Approaches is framed by its opening speech, a moving elegy to the American immigrant journey by an old rabbi, himself likely an immigrant from Eastern Europe. As he pays homage to Sarah Ironson, a woman he “did not know and yet knew,” the rabbi positions the play as beginning at the end of an era: “You can never make that crossing she made, for such Great Voyages do not any more exist.”³⁵ Each of the characters is situated in and against their own personal, familial, and ancestral histories: Prior struggles with his ancestors and his role as the “scion of an ancient line,”³⁶ Louis with his place in American history, and Joe with the traditional Mormon values that give structure to his life but do him great harm. Each of their character arcs, as well as that of Roy Cohn, feel like the end of a much longer arc reaching back centuries. This sense of long historical time is amplified by the constant Biblical references throughout *Angels in America*. The recurring themes of plague and apocalypse, the presence of religious leaders like the Rabbi, the references to religious ideas about justice and destiny, and most blatantly the arrival onstage of an actual angel are all dramatic elements that frame this play as deeply interested in Judeo-Christian religion. Kushner positions this sense of longer historical time that stretches back to the era of the Old Testament in parallel with the relatively shorter timeline of American history. The action we witness gains emotional weight when we see it as situated at the end of these two very long histories.

At the same time, as its title indicates, *Millennium Approaches* is full of apocalyptic references to the future: the coming turn of the century. As the play’s multiple plots entangle and its characters begin to break from their social scripts, we feel

35. Kushner, 10-11.

36. Kushner, 121.

(as Ethel Rosenberg puts it near the end of *Millennium Approaches*) that “history is about to crack wide open.” For the play’s characters, this apocalypse was distinctly real: in 1985 the AIDS deaths were nearing their peak, and there were no true solutions in sight. People were dying, the government did not pay attention to their suffering, and the first treatment drugs like AZT were not to be certified by the FDA until 1987.³⁷ In a pre-ACT UP New York City, the character’s lives are fully absent of the kind of political action this organization galvanized. Though AIDS activism certainly existed in 1985, the future looked truly bleak for the characters inhabiting the world of *Angels in America: AIDS* seemed a deadly plague with few solutions, medical or political, in sight. *Angels in America* toys with this idea of an apocalyptic plague, mocking the false claim that the AIDS epidemic was sent to punish gays at the same time as it takes seriously that 1985 might well be very close to the end of history.

Kushner positions the play’s action as the eye of the historical hurricane, a key crisis point in a distinctly American history whose arc reaches back towards the “Old World” on one end and leads forwards into an uncertain and terrifying future on the other. The effect of this positioning is that *Angels* is, in every way, a heightened play. It makes a great effort to present itself as an epic. The way Kushner positions its action in history is only one part of *Angels in America*’s epic feel: the sheer length of the play also supports this feeling of heightened importance. The play luxuriates in its own language, regularly choosing a longer, more evocative phrase in place of a simpler one. In a well-

37. HIV.gov, “A Timeline of HIV and AIDS,” last modified February 8, 2022, <https://www.hiv.gov/hiv-basics/overview/history/hiv-and-aids-timeline>.

executed production, these lines do not amount to fluff padding the play's runtime—instead, the joy of the language becomes part of the point.

In the Theater and Dance Department's production of *Angels in America*, this relationship with historical time informs the play's scenography. In 2021, the play's 1980s setting makes it a bit of a period piece. While not fully “retro,” the costumes speak to the aesthetic of the time. The few details in props and sound design that fill out the setting of each scene also support the play's placement in 1985. Meanwhile, the set reaches both back and forwards in history in terms of its visual referents. The neo-classical façade of the back wall recalls the architectural style of the early American republic. A survey of statehouses around the country—which I did as part of my scenic research—will demonstrate that these elements, such as white stone, Doric columns, and long, wide marble steps, are loaded with associations to America, government, and democracy. Of course, the “classical” in neo-classical refers to the fact that these designs reach all the way back to the architecture of Ancient Greece and Rome. Such an association with ancient democracies and Old World European cultural iconography aligns with the text's Biblical and historical references. At the same time, like Kushner's text, the set portends the coming apocalyptic turn of the millennium: how else to interpret the jagged crack that runs through the center of the wall?

It is impossible to separate the presentation of space and the presentation of time in this production of *Angels in America*. In both areas, the production used scenographic strategies to heighten the complex way the text presents its material. Taken together, the heterotopic space in which the story of *Angels in America* unfolds and the play's

heightened position in historical time are fundamental elements in how it was received by its audience.

Angels as a Public Memorial

To understand how *Angels in America* functions as a public memorial, we should interpret it as Hann would, as an “encounter of world.” This line of analysis prompts us to approach the play from the perspective of an audience member experiencing it, starting with the most basic of theatrical conventions. At Macalester, *Angels in America* is presented as a traditional play in which audience members migrate to the theater from their jobs and homes and classes and to take a seat in an auditorium by curtain time. Peter Brook argues that in the popular imagination of most Western cultures, theater is defined by “red curtains, spotlights, blank verse, laughter, darkness... all confusedly superimposed in a messy image covered by one all-purpose word.”³⁸ This process of amalgamating a variety of structural, textual, and aesthetic elements into a culturally recognizable “place” produces the experience of the theater as a space apart that is separated from daily life both geographically and in its experience. In this way, the theater is like the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. In designing the Memorial, Maya Lin wanted to create “a park within a park” in which visitors could reflect on the war’s tragedy. Her vision is consistent with my experience of the Memorial: though it is easily accessible from the rest of the National Mall, walking into it does feel like stepping into a space apart. It cannily uses scenographic techniques to create distance between the

38. Brook, quoted in Hann, 36.

experience of being at the wall and the hot dog vendors, chattering tourists, and annoying geese in the world beyond. For both the play and the memorial, presenting themselves as a space apart is the first step in producing the space they establish for their audience.

The Vietnam Veterans Memorial could hardly be more explicit about who it memorializes: its primary feature is a list that names the American soldiers who died or went missing in the war. As a play, *Angels in America* centers on the lives of fictional characters and has no stated mission such as that put to the designers of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. Naturally, then, what and who *Angels* might memorialize is much less obvious. However, I make the case that *Angels in America*, like all plays about history, is full of ghosts. But which ghosts does it memorialize? Further, looking at the Theater and Dance Department production, I ask myself: how can a 2021 staging of *Angels in America* act as a memorial for events that much of its audience will not remember?

In his book *The Haunted Stage*, scholar Marvin Carlson makes the case that theater, as “a site of the continuing reinforcement of memory by surrogation”³⁹ is an inherently haunted form. To Carlson, the actor is by nature a surrogate. For instance, an actor playing Roy Cohn is not just Roy Cohn onstage, nor are they simply an actor interpreting Roy Cohn. Instead, Carlson argues, the structure of performance means the character is in effect “ghosted” by all the previous actors who have played the role of Roy

39. Marvin Carlson, *The Haunted Stage: The Theater as Memory Machine*, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001), 2.

Cohn, as well as the real-life individual Roy Cohn. The language of ghosting is a useful parallel to Zizek's notion of living dead.

Angels in America is filled with characters who resemble Zizek's living dead: those who have not "received a decent burial" continue to "haunt" the living until their memory is re-assimilated into collective consciousness. Ethel Rosenberg, a historical figure who was executed in the Red Scare of the 1950s for conspiracy against the US government, returns to haunt the man who is essentially her murderer, Roy Cohn. Cohn himself fits the definition of Zizek's living dead: he is a deeply complicated figure whose McCarthyist, arch-conservative politics contradict his Jewish and (closeted) gay identities, and his status as a Person With AIDS (PWA). *Angels in America* reinterprets his legacy in a nuanced way, positioning Cohn as the antagonist of the play—a role in which he can be truly awful—at the same time that it rehabilitates his humanity from the often anti-Semitic and homophobic narrative of those on the left who gleefully cheered his downfall. These are far from the only histories that ghost *Angels in America*. There are more literal ghosts: Prior's long-dead ancestors, also named Prior Walter, make two appearances to remind him (and us) that plague, sickness, and early, brutal death are not historical anomalies but are consistent and recurring throughout time. Most importantly, the play is haunted by the hundreds of thousands of people lost to AIDS. These hauntings are underscored by more abstract loss, one I will return to later: a broken American ideal. In this sense, the ghosts of multiple American ideologies and mythologies haunt this play as well, finding mouthpieces in a variety of characters. Roy Cohn exudes a kind of conservative nihilism while Joe relies on a much more traditional religious frame. Louis, on the other hand, spouts a variety of liberal ideologies (that are often wildly at odds with

each other). The feeling of an impending apocalypse forces all these characters to question their beliefs. In this process, their faith in America is thrown into doubt.

In Carlson's understanding, ghosting is reliant on the connections audience members make with a staging of play based on prior knowledge. So, while for many the specter of Roy Cohn the historical figure haunts *Angels in America*, others may not even know that he was a real man—thus, their experience of his storyline lacks that doubled or tripled layer. This was likely the case for many in the audience of the Macalester production. Though they are likely able to recall some context for the events they were part of, many students do not know who Roy Cohn or Ethel Rosenberg were. Even more importantly, they are too young to remember the AIDS epidemic and those lost to it. So, what does it mean to stage *Angels in America* in 2021 to an audience of mostly college students born fifteen or more years after its events are set?

Remembering the way that *Angels in America* positions its action in historical time is indispensable here. On one hand, the crises its characters strive to survive are not the crises of 2021. The specific factors motivating the characters' historical anxiety now belong to the past. But the way Kushner situates *Angels* in time, with its corresponding emotional weight, may feel just as familiar today. The play was chosen at Macalester in the context of what had then been a year and a half of the coronavirus pandemic: because of this, its recurring references to Biblical and historical plagues felt immediately familiar. The idea of a coming apocalypse, whether it be due to climate change or nuclear war, also feels written into the DNA of my generation. Thus, an *Angels* produced at a college in 2021 can feel as historically heightened as ever. Removed even further from the specificity of the AIDS struggle and the historical anxieties of 1985, the play becomes

more transparently about big American questions within a grander historical timeline. This is not to say that it is not also a historical piece: *Angels* is deeply concerned with the specifics of AIDS. But at the same time, the reach of its questioning goes well beyond AIDS. In the Macalester production, the additional distance from the time of the play's action forms yet another layer of multiple consciousness through which the play can be received.

Ochsner explains that “objects that serve as linking objects cannot be ‘overdetermined’... they must leave space into which the projection can occur.”⁴⁰ The Vietnam Veterans Memorial's simple, elegant form achieves this. The black granite and sloping shape of the Memorial have emotional qualities, but they do not declare their meaning to the viewer. Producing this ambiguity of meaning, which Ochsner simply calls “leaving space,” is critical to designing a linking object. If, as I have previously argued, *Angels* is situated in a fundamentally American space, then the minimal visual aesthetic and the care taken to present the play's internal logic are key to not overdetermining this space. The smoothness of transitions and the overarching visual of the set support the dreamlike, fluid flow which Aronson rightly identifies as necessary to the play's success. The play's visual style is essential to avoiding “overdetermination.”

Though I have focused my analysis on the scenographic dimension of the Theater and Dance Department at Macalester College's 2021 production of *Angels in America*, this is obviously not the only factor in making the play a memorial. Other elements of the production also contribute to creating the kind of space of reflection Ochsner outlines.

40. Ochsner, 163.

Paradoxically, a principal method for “making space” comes not from minimalism but from the play’s abundance of themes. I have already addressed so many of these themes, which Savran identifies as dialectics: the contradictory future and past-ness of the story, the conflicting nature of its ideologies, the tension between the specifics of its setting and its place in general, even mythic American space. *Angels in America* is haunted by so much, from the literal ghosts in the script to those summoned by association with life in 2021. We experience this abundance of meaning as many voices talking all at once, contradicting each other in a messy soup of ideologies, identities, and symbols. Savran highlights how, while *Angels* gives the appearance of ambiguity, many of these supposed tensions are “always already decided.”⁴¹ The play’s orientation is in these hidden decisions.

Like all memorials, *Angels in America* represents a narrative of history. In his analysis of the play, Savran calls this *Angels*’ ability to “reconstruct the nation.”⁴² Rather than declaring this narrative, however, the narrative is built into the world that its audience experiences. *Angels in America* acts as a linking object for audience feelings of grief, loss, doubt, and anxiety about American history. But what may seem like open-endedness hides a political nature inherent to any play about American history. In this way, Kushner’s play is like the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. The Memorial was tasked with being politically neutral: in response, its designer created a world that supported projection of meaning. But the Memorial frames its historical moment in ways that are so

41. David Savran, “Ambivalence, Utopia, and a Queer Sort of Materialism: How *Angels in America* Reconstructs the Nation,” in *Approaching the Millennium: Essays on Angels in America*, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 23.

42. Savran, 13.

obvious we may miss them. We must remember that the wall names American soldiers lost, and not the Vietnamese soldiers and civilians who died in the war; that it was commissioned by the same US Government that conducted the war; that it exists in the symbolic heart of the nation's capital. These facts frame the range of responses that the Memorial makes possible. Fully analyzing the range of political orientations of *Angels in America* is beyond the scope of this essay; Savran's take that the play puts forth a queered politics of liberal pluralism seems like a solid start to me.⁴³ Crucially for the purposes of this essay, though, I wish to emphasize that representations of a nation, whether they are explicitly ideological or intentionally ambiguous, are always political. Thus, designers of public memorials have a responsibility to think critically about what their memorial says about its public.

Conclusion

In this essay, I have focused Hann's ideas about scenography on public memorials and shown that scenography is central to how such memorials function. I have argued that performances like Macalester's production of *Angels in America* can function as public memorials do by using several similar strategies. Taking Hann's framework alongside Ochsner's analysis, I understand how the Vietnam Veterans Memorial interacts with its viewers, how it creates a space of reflection, and how it reconstructs the idea of nation. Scenography is essential to each of these functions. Macalester's *Angels in America* interacted similarly with its audience, encouraging

43. Savran, 33.

reflection by making itself a linking object. And it, too, reconstructed the idea of nation. Kushner's *Angels in America*, like Lin's Memorial, is an "encounter with world." The play's world is carefully situated in space and time such that its action takes on many layers of significance. Ultimately, these layers of meaning function as a repository for audience memory—and in turn, they restructure that memory.

As I finish writing this essay, I realize that I am in the same room in which I spent several August days, beginning to move a few cardboard cutouts around a model box. I also realize that I still have not decided, once and for all, what I think of *Angels in America*. I am awed by the play's ambition, in love with the beauty of some of its sequences, bored by its lengthy self-importance, troubled by its political implications... after three quarters of a year with this play, I still cannot settle on a simple answer. But it does not matter what I think: more importantly, I hope and believe that our production connected with enough people to make it worthwhile. I am suspicious of the idea of art as social healing, which Yasmine Nair clearly illuminates the dangers of.⁴⁴ But if Macalester's production of *Angels in America* was not a space for healing, it was at the very least a space for reflection—a mirror, maybe. It reflected a foggy image of its audience, like the figures viewed in the Vietnam Veterans Memorial's black stone. Many faces, hard to make out whose, swim in its depths.

Maybe this is *Angels'* gift to us: the fact that it does not give itself away so easily. Despite my misgivings about its politics, it creates a space that is endlessly able to

44. Yasmine Nair, "Make Art! Change the World! Starve!: The Fallacy of Art as Social Justice—Part 1," August 12, 2010, <https://yasminnair.com/make-art-change-the-world-starve-the-fallacy-of-art-as-social-justice-part-i/>.

receive and support critique, projection, reflection, loss, doubt, grief, anxiety... in this way, its performance is a memorial. If nothing else, *Angels in America*'s memorializing strength attests to the value of art that aspires to epic proportions. I hope my essay demonstrates the importance of the visual and spatial dimensions of theater in producing these monumental performances. Scenographers have a real power: to build worlds that reflect, and reconstruct, our own.

Appendix



Set for *Millennium Approaches* at Macalester College, Nov. 2021. (Photo Alice Endo).



Harper (Anna Schloerb) and Joe (Lucas Eggers) in *America*.

(Photo Shosuke Noma, shared with actors' permission).

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