

The eyes of Tony Kushner

The man who envisioned *Angels* is moving on: collaborating on a musical and a children's book, in addition to working on a new play about beauty, bodies, and of course, politics **By Michael Giltz**



Your new musical, *Caroline, or Change*, [now playing at the Public Theater in New York] is set in Lake Charles, La., where you grew up. Are you a Southern writer or a writer who happens to be from the South?

Oh, I could definitely identify with that. There's a certain...swooniness [laughs] to my writing that I would associate with Tennessee Williams and other Southern writers. He was a big influence on me, certainly.

What was the first musical that made a big impression on you?

Of course, I grew up with music. [Kushner's parents were classical musicians.] I think one of the first musicals I ever saw was *Camelot*. And of course, I was a gay kid. I had the cast album to *My Fair Lady*, and I knew every word.

Just as *Caroline* opens, HBO is showing *Angels in America*. At first I thought, *Maybe enough time has passed; we can appreciate it as a story, not an AIDS play*. But so much is still the same. Witness the flap over *The Reagans*, with his defenders taking umbrage at the idea that Reagan was anything but compassionate to people with AIDS. Oh, you know what's going to happen as soon as he dies. They're going to try and say how wonderful and warm [he was]. Already Andrew Sullivan has written how that collection of his letters [*Ronald Reagan: A Life in Letters*] proved he was intelligent and kind. I've read them, and they're Post-it notes! "Dear so-and-so, thanks for your letter. I appreciate hearing from you. We'll send that file along as soon as we can. Sincerely." He and [George W.] Bush have seemed so demonstrably stupid in public that when you find out they can actually write a coherent sentence, people say, "Oh, they're smart." Well, there's a great difference between "smart" and "not as completely stupid as we thought."

How did *Angels* change for its TV adaptation?

It's a movie, not a play. It had to be cut. And I think Mike Nichols was really smart. I'm so proud of the movie they made, and I was treated so wonderfully.

You're publishing your first children's book, *Brundibar*, a collaboration with Maurice Sendak. And didn't you and your partner, Mark Harris, just get married?

On April 27, 2003. Oh, God, was it April 27? I better not get that wrong.

I've always believed in community, and when you get married you're saying to that community, "This is the man I love, and I expect you to honor that."

One of your amazing achievements is how much weight you've lost since you wrote *Angels*.

I was weighing 240 pounds in 1994. And John Candy, that very good comic actor, died of a heart attack at 43. I went to my doctor and he said, "Your cholesterol is way up," and I got scared. I lost about 100 pounds. I wasn't in great shape, but suddenly I was getting cruised on the streets. And if you're really into that emaciated look, I looked pretty good. And I went to some sex clubs and had a wonderful time. I've gone up and down about 30 pounds since then but never more than that.

Did you worry that losing weight was caving into body fascism or some other idea about beauty and what's attractive?

I'm writing a play that's in part about that, right now. A new play, the first one to really deal with gay subjects since *Angels*.

Are you happy right now?

I'm pretty happy. I'm a little freaked-out, freaked to shit about the fact that in one two-week period *Caroline* opens and *Angels* airs on HBO and now *Brundibar* is getting reviewed in *The New York Times*. That just seems a little bit bizarre. And the book that I wrote about Maurice Sendak is coming out that week too. I'm really proud of each of these things. I am happy in a way. But Bush is president, so you can't be happy. But I hope by next November that will change too. ■

Giltz is a regular contributor to several periodicals, including the New York Post.