

COLUMBIA SPECTATOR ARCHIVE

Columbia Daily Spectator, Volume CXVIII, Number 18, 10 February 1994 — Kushner discusses playwriting
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Kushner discusses playwriting

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Fifty people turned out to hear Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright Tony Kushner, CC '78, author of "Angels in America," speak about playwriting and gay politics last night at Hartley-Wallach.

Kushner, whose accomplishments will be recognized at the Columbia College Alumni Association's John Jay Awards on Mar. 10, first spoke of his development as an actor and a director as an undergraduate at Columbia College where he was a member of the Columbia Players and a theater critic for *Spectator*.

Kushner said that as an undergraduate he had hoped to go into theater, but doubted he could be successful. He began writing plays as a graduate student in New York University's school of directing.

"I wanted to be a playwright, but I doubted my success," Kushner said.

His first play, "A Bright Room Called Day," was "sabotaged by critics on both sides of the Atlantic." But despite its poor commercial performance, Kushner was commissioned by the Eureka theater in San Francisco to write another play. After receiving a \$57,000 grant from the National Endowment for the Arts, he began to write what became the two-part "Angels in America."

"I wanted to write something about gay men, Mormons, and Roy

Cohn. This was 1986, and under the Reagan administration, I really didn't expect to get the grant," Kushner said.

Kushner reported that his experience as a director occasionally made it difficult for directors to work with him as an author. He said he rarely attended rehearsals, and when he did attend, he loaded the director with pages of notes on the performance.

"I checked in on some of the run-throughs, and I produced 30 or 40 pages of notes. It's harder for the director if the playwright has ideas. My notes made one director throw up, and another cry. There is an S&M quality to it. There has got to be a more decent and dignified way," Kushner said.

Kushner added that each production of "Angels" has been very different, and he feels that the show works better in smaller theaters than it does in the 800-seat Walter Kerr theater on 48th Street, where it is currently playing to packed houses.

"Every production is radically different. I never had an idea of what it should look like on the stage, and it's always better to do work in smaller spaces," Kushner said.

Though his play has been very successful, Kushner feels that its success is more due to the fact that it is timely than that it is socially important.

"It came at the perfect time in history. Clinton may have boggled

the gays in the military, but he forced the whole debate to occur. It wound up when people were ready to see it. The moment had to create the play, the play couldn't create the moment," Kushner said.

Kushner added that negotiations have recently been completed for the making of a film version of "Angels in America."

Because of the recent box-office success of the movie "Philadelphia," the story of a gay man with AIDS suing his employers after he is fired, alleging an anti-gay bias, Kushner feels the American public is ready to look at a film about AIDS.

"We need a big studio film with two men or women having sex. I want Joe and Louis to have hot—" Kushner said, cutting himself off and referring to two homosexual characters who become lovers in the course of his play.

Julie Fasano, BC '95, said she was thrilled by meeting Kushner, adding, "I didn't know what to expect. I was so amazed by the show that I had to meet the man who wrote it."

"It was really good. I like his public persona, and I agreed with his ideas. It is a really good play to be exposed to new ideas or to reinforce your own," said Brendan Scherer, CC '95.

"I learned more about Mr. Kushner. It was nice to see what he had to say. He went to Columbia, and we are proud of that," said Elizabeth Yuan, CC '96.



PHOTO EDITOR — MELISSA CHEUNG

In the second of a series of "Conversations with Cole" yesterday, University Provost Jonathan Cole said he supports a student petition seeking the establishment of a new sexual assault policy.