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BRIGHT ROOM called DAY

NS

11TH UR INTERNATIONAL THEATRE PROGRAM PRESENTING
UNIVERSITY of ROCHESTER
the ur international theatre program

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graphic, program & poster design
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a note about the program
Program content is compiled by the production’s Assistant Director, Lydia Jimenez, and edited by Nigel Maister. For a complete list of sources and works cited, please contact the Theatre Program.

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When he was seven years old, Tony Kushner watched his mother perform in a small town theatre production of Death of a Salesman.

“I watched my mother acting, and looked across the stage and saw all these adults, weeping,” Kushner says in a 2012 interview with The Paris Review. “It was the sixties, so women wore mascara, and I remember seeing all these raccoon eyes. I remember thinking, something’s going on here. I don’t quite understand the play, but my mother is making all these people cry.”

This moment, Kushner believes, inspired him to become a playwright. Before writing a line of dialogue, however, he did a lot of reading. In his sophomore year at Columbia University, he discovered Bertolt Brecht, William Shakespeare, and Karl Marx. These writers appealed to Kushner for their “dialectics”: the manner in which ideas are opposed, opinions critically examined, and arguments are constructed. Kushner wrote his first play, A Bright Room Called Day, in attempt to “imitate” Brecht’s Fear and Misery in the Third Reich. He enjoyed Brecht’s juxtaposition of “trivial and momentous events.” “I love the idea of these little scenes showing daily life while the world was going to hell,” Kushner says. “It was an attempt to deal with Brecht, with German subject matter, with Germany. Bright Room was a struggle of someone who is fighting to find his or her own voice and persona as a writer, and to wrest an independent persona from a progenitor.”

Kushner, who is gay, has a distinctive dramatic voice. Infused with the political (and dialectical) his voice is also intimately personal. This fusion of the external and the intimate can be seen with stunning effect in Kushner’s Pulitzer Prize winning epic Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes.

Kushner was born in New York City on July 16, 1956, and raised in Lake Charles, Louisiana. His parents worked as musicians in Lake Charles. His mother (a graduate of the Eastman School of Music) was first bassoonist in the Lake Charles Symphony, and his father, a clarinetist, eventually conducted that symphony and others. Kushner drew on his childhood in Louisiana in his musical (with Jeanine Tesori) Caroline, or Change, and on his self-effacing mother in developing the title character of his 2001 play, Homebody/Kabul.

Tony Kushner is the recipient of a Pulitzer Prize for Drama, an Emmy Award, two Tony Awards, three Obie Awards, a Laurence Olivier Award, a Spirit of Justice Award from the Gay and Lesbian Advocates and Defenders, a Cultural Achievement Award from The National Foundation for Jewish Culture, an Arts Award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, and most recently, a National Medal of Arts, “the highest award given to artists and arts patrons by the United States government.”

Notable Works and Awards:

Tony Kushner

b. 16 July 1956

“My mother was a really great bassoonist and a wonderful actress,” Kushner recalls, “but she had a very odd relationship to her accomplishments. Pride tended to manifest itself furtively.” This reticence might infuse an element of the character of Agnes in Bright Room.

Kushner’s dramatic voice marries his astute political awareness with personal experience. In his afterword to the published version of Bright Room, Kushner warns the reader that we must be “wary of the illusory comfort of our rooms”; of our tendency and very easy ability to be comfortable in our own spaces, in our own routines, obligations, and passions, while violence and injustice rage in spheres not immediately to us. Kushner’s work insists that we take politics personally—that we have an important obligation to live beyond the walls of our small, solid rooms, and to engage, in some way, with an unstable world.

David Tennent (Projection Design) creates interactive video installations, custom theatrical software, and projection designs for theatre. Off-Broadway and Downtown: La Ruta (Working Theater); PS Jones and the Frozen City (New Ohio); Ballet For Adolph (New World Stages); How to Break (HERE); The Language Archive (Fordham); Chimera (HERE, Under The Radar 2012). Regional: Twelve Night (Aquila Theatre); The Clean House (Syracuse Stage); Holiday Review (Oregon Ballet Theater). Associate Productions: Sweet Bird of Youth (Goodman Theater, Chicago); Crowns (Goodman Theater, Chicago). Dave has taught projection workshops at Syracuse University, New York University, and Harvard University. He is a founding member of Imaginary Media Artists.

Kate Freer (Projection Design) is a multimedia designer and video artist for theater, film, and installations. Off-Broadway and Downtown: Around the World in 80 Days (The New Theater at 45th Street); PS Jones and the Frozen City (The New Ohio); Cry for Peace: Voices from the Congo (La Mama, Undesirable Element Festival); Ballet for Adolph (New World Stages); Chimera (HERE, Under the Radar 2012); Vaclav Havel’s Hunt For the Pig (3LD, Ice Factory Festival 2011). Regional: Fahrenheit 451 (Aquila Theatre); Stuck Elevator (American Conservatory Theater); The Mountaintop (Center Stage); The Clean House (Syracuse Stage); Holiday Review (Oregon Ballet Theater). Her installation work has been exhibited at the National Building Museum, The Hammond Museum, 3LD, Front Room Gallery, and the World Wide Words Festival (Denmark). She has taught workshops at Harvard University, Syracuse University, Wesleyan, and New York University. Kate is a founding partner of Imaginary Media Artists.
**artist bios**

**Lila Neugebauer** (Director) Upcoming directing work includes the world premieres of Zoe Kazan’s *Truly & Max in Love* (South Coast Rep) and Dorothy Fortenberry’s *Partners* (2014 Humana Festival). Her recent projects include Dan LeFranc’s *Troublemaker*, or the Frankie Kick-A-Adventures of Bradley Boatright (Berkeley Repertory Theatre); Lucas Hnath’s *Red Specks* (The Studio Theatre, DC); Mallery Avidson’s *O Guru Guru* (2013 Humana Festival); Annie Baker’s *The Aliens* (West Coast Premiere, SF Playhouse, The Studio Theatre, DC) and *Circle Mirror Transformation* (Juliard); *The Valley of Fear* (Williamstown Theatre Festival); Eliza Clark’s *Edgewise* (Cherry Lane Studio) and *Snow Day* (Drama League); *The Wii Plays* (Ars Nova); and Associate Directing Karen O’s *Stop the Virgins* (St. Ann’s Warehouse, Sydney Opera House, dir. Adam Rapp). As co-Artistic Director of The Mad Ones, Lila conceives and directs ensemble-devised works, including: *Samuel & Alabaster: A Personal History of the Robot War* (Ars Nova, The Brick, The New Ohio Theatre) and the upcoming currently untitled *Biopic Project* (The New Ohio Theatre, May 2014). Lila is an alum of the Drama League, Soho Rep Writer/Director Lab, and Lincoln Center Directors Lab; a member of Ensemble Studio Theatre; a New Georges Affiliated Artist; a Time Warnering act of the imagination. He calls “a dialectically shaped truth,” which must be “outrageously funny” and “absolutely agonizing,” and must “move us forward.” He gives voice to characters who have been rendered powerless by the forces of circumstance—a drag queen dying of AIDS, an uneducated Southern maid, contemporary Afghans—and his attempt to see all sides of their predicament has a sly subversiveness. He forces the audience to identify with the marginalized—a humanizing act of the imagination.

**Jessica Parst** (Costume Design) Recent NYC credits include: *Somewhere Fun* and *The Children* (The Vineyard Theatre); *Ticking Care of Baby and Murder Ballad* (Manhattan Theatre Club/ Union Square Theatre); *The Whale* (Lucille Lortel Award); *Assisttanic* (Playwrights Horizons); *Nobody Loves You, Warrior Class and The Bad Guys* (Second Stage); *Bayer and Cellar* (Barrow Street); *The Revisionist, Through the Yellow Hour and The Hallway Trilogy* (Rattlestick Playwrights Theatre); *3 Pianos* (New York Theatre Workshop). Regional: *The Few* (Old Globe); *Cliffbourne Park* (Chautauqua Theatre Festival); *The Glass Menagerie* (University of Rochester); *Good People* (Cleveland Playhouse, Syracuse Stage); *Thei* (Kirk Douglas Theatre); *3 Pianos* (American Repertory Theatre). Her work has also appeared at P73, Ars Nova, The Juilliard School, St. Ann’s Warehouse, and Princeton University. Drama Desk Nomination, Henry Hewes Design Nomination.

**Eric Southern** (Lighting Design) Most recent work was on the world premiere of *Play/Pause* (Choreographer Susan Marshall, Composer David Lang) at BAM’s Next Wave Festival. The opera *The Secret Agent* (by Michael Dellaira dir. by Sam Helfrich) premiered at the Avignon Opera House, and as part of the Arme International Opera Festival in Szeged, Hungary. Other theater work includes the world premiere of *Bayer and Cellar, 600 Highwaysmen*. His work has been seen at The Magic Theater, Portland Center Stage, The Commonwealth Shakespeare Company, Kansas City Repertory Theatre, The Atlantic Theater, and the Juilliard School of Drama.

**Brandon Wolcott** (Sound Design & Composition) has composed music and designed sound for dance and theatre at dozens of spaces around NYC and the U.S. Recent/Notable: *Hit the Wall* (Barrow Street Theater); *Good Person of Szechwan* (La Mama); *Henry V* (original music, Two Rivers Shakespeare Festival); *Kiss the Air* (The Park Avenue Armory); *Titus Andronicus* (original music, The Public); *The Maidens with Red Bull Theatre Co. and The Tenant with the Woodshed Collective. NYC credits include: Manhattan Theater Club, Lincoln Center, The Public, Ontological, Joyce, DTW, 59e59, PS122, 3LD, and New Ohio.

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**Selected works**

**Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes** (1992); Pulitzer Prize for Drama

**Slava’s Thinking About the Longstanding Problems of Virtue and Happiness** (1994)

**Hedda Gabler** (2001); Obie Award for Playwriting

**Caroline, or Change** (2003); Laurence Olivier Award for Best Musical

**The Illusion**, freely adapted from Pierre Corneille’s *L’illusion comique* (2003); produced in the UR International Theatre Program’s 2009-2010 season

**Brundibár**: A Children’s Opera (English libretto by Kushner, adapted from the 1938 opera by Hans Krása and Adolf Hoffmeister). *Brundibár* was performed in 1942 by children of Terezienstadt concentration camp, located in the modern day Czech Republic. After the production was filmed in 1944 for the Nazi propaganda film, *The Führer gives the Jews a City*, most of the participants, including the children and Krása, were trucked to Auschwitz and gassed immediately upon arrival. *Brundibár* was also adapted into a children’s book by Kushner, with illustrations by Maurice Sendak.

**Munich** (2005); screenplay by Kushner, dir. by Steven Spielberg

**The Intelligent Homosexual’s Guide to Capitalism and Socialism with a Key to the Scriptures** (2009)

**Lincoln** (2012); screenplay by Kushner, dir. by Steven Spielberg

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**john lahr** in “*After Angels*,” *The New Yorker*, 2005
The political structure of the Weimar Republic

The Reichstag and calls for new elections. Absence of a parliamentary majority throughout the early 1930s hindered the passage of legislation, and incited repeated dissolutions of the Reichstag. Absence of a parliamentary majority made up more than 52% of the population in time in the country's history, women were granted the right to vote, and made up more than 52% of the potential electorate. A plethora of political ideologies, lively discourse, and a widespread spirit to rally led to the formation of numerous political parties. The voting ballot often listed more than thirty parties in an election. Six major parties along the Left-Right political spectrum commanded substantial voting blocs, but a party would receive a percentage of seats in the house roughly equal to the percentage of the vote it won in elections. Under a stable government, Reichstag elections were to be held every four years. The Reichstag passed laws and administered the government budget. The president, elected every seven years by popular vote, had the power to issue legislation without prior consent of the Reichstag. The president also appointed a Chancellor, who would negotiate majority support within the Reichstag in order to pass legislation. If a parliamentary majority was not achieved, the president had the right to “dissolve” the Reichstag and issue new elections within sixty days.

The Weimar Republic was an atmosphere of great political revolution and activism. For the first time in the country's history, women were granted the right to vote, and made up more than 52% of the potential electorate. A plethora of political ideologies, lively discourse, and a widespread spirit to rally led to the formation of numerous political parties. The voting ballot often listed more than thirty parties in an election. Six major parties along the Left-Right political spectrum commanded substantial voting blocs, but representation won from minor parties with sectional and regional interests discouraged majority coalitions within the Reichstag. Absence of a parliamentary majority throughout the early 1930s hindered the passing of legislation, and incited repeated dissolutions of the Reichstag and calls for new elections.
Since 1871, Paragraph 175 of the Reich penal code prohibited homosexuality in the Weimar Republic. Article 118 of the Weimar Constitution lifted censorship, and sparked the emergence of cabarets: restaurants and nightclubs in which patrons were entertained by singers, dancers, and comedians. By the 1920s, entertainment at these venues had grown increasingly sexual and political. Jokes contained political and sexual innuendoes and eventually routines featured open displays of nudity. Gay and transgender persons used the cabaret culture’s liberalization for unfettered expression of their sexualities.

German physician Magnus Hirschfeld, regarded as one of the most important early pioneers in sexology, theorized that homosexuals belonged to a “third sex”: “something not complete and closed in itself, but rather, an intermediary state between different states of sexuality, of which there are an infinite number of possibilities.” His theories were among the first attempts to explain and defend homosexuality. One of his organizations, the Scientific Humanitarian Committee, is credited as being the first official organization concerned with gay rights. On July 6, 1919, Hirschfeld opened the Institute of Sexual Research in Berlin. The Institute housed his immense library on sex, and provided educational services and medical consultations. On May 6, 1933, the library was confiscated by the Nazi police. Most of the library’s 12,000 books and 35,000 irreplaceable pictures were burned four days later in Berlin’s city center.

Kushner was working in the Lincoln Center Library for the Performing Arts when he misheard the name of a dance described by American dancer and choreographer, Agnes DeMille, on a video recording. “From across the room, I thought she said it would be titled ‘A Bright Room Called Day.’ Which sounded lovely. Then, when I actually walked over to the videotape monitor, I discovered the dance was in fact called ‘A Bridegroom Called Death.’ But the other title stuck with me.”

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“Cast

agnes egging ........ murie gillett
gregor bazwald (baz) ........ ian von fange
paulinka erdmuss ........ kathryn loveless
annabella gotchling ........ stella kammel
vealtninc husz ........ daniel mensel
rosa malek ........ katharine mccorkle
emil traun ....... jacob goritski
die alte ........ hannah wiltse
gottfried swetts ........ shane r. saxton

homosexuality in
the weimar republic

There are moments in history when the fabric of everyday life unravel, and there is this unstable dynamism that allows for incredible social change in short periods of time. It’s a moment when the ground and sky sort of split apart, and there’s a space, a revolutionary space. During these periods all sorts of people—even people who are passive under the pressure of everyday life in capitalist society—are touched by the spirit of revolution and behave in extraordinary ways. These spaces only exist for very limited periods of time and then somebody’s going to get control. That’s what ‘a bright room called day’ is. That space.

If the Left had not lost heart at a series of critical moments, I think Hitler might not have been able to take power. And the fact that they lost heart and lost the struggle was a catastrophe for the entire planet.

—tony kushner, in a conversation with tom szentgyorgyi

a note about the title

Kushner was working in the Lincoln Center Library for the Performing Arts when he misheard the name of a dance described by American dancer and choreographer, Agnes DeMille, on a video recording. “From across the room, I thought she said it would be titled ‘A Bright Room Called Day.’ Which sounded lovely. Then, when I actually walked over to the videotape monitor, I discovered the dance was in fact called ‘A Bridegroom Called Death.’ But the other title stuck with me.”
After World War I, Germany was burdened with the reparations imposed by the Allied powers in the Treaty of Versailles. The Treaty held Germany responsible for initiating the war, and for “all loss and damage” incurred by the Allied forces. In addition to monetary reparations, the Treaty restricted Germany’s military: the army was limited to 100,000 men, the country was forbidden to keep an air force and could not acquire or maintain a submarine fleet. Unable to pay their war debts, the German government mass-printed its currency, decreasing its value and driving the economy into severe hyperinflation—by November 1923, one American dollar was worth 4,210,500,000,000 German marks. The German economy was further devastated by the Great Depression. By June 1932, six million people were unemployed.

Adolf Hitler’s campaign promised to rescue the country from its economic crisis. Hitler blamed the Jews for Germany’s troubles. His doctrine was one of “Social Darwinism.” Social Darwinism proposed that “human beings were not one species, but divided into ‘races’ that were biologically driven to struggle against one another for living space to ensure their survival.” The doctrine posited that the Jewish race was biologically inferior to the pure, “Aryan” race (characterized by blonde hair and blue eyes). According to Hitler, Jews attempted to weaken nations in Central Europe economically and politically, and also endeavored to pollute Aryan blood through intermarriage and sexual relations with non-Jews.

According to the Concise Encyclopedia of Economics, fascism is “socialism with a capitalist veneer.” “Where socialism sought totalitarian control of a society’s economic processes through direct state operation of the means of production, fascism sought that control indirectly, through domination of nominally private owners.” “Fascism” is derived from the Latin word, *fasces*, a tied bundle of reeds with a protruding axe. This Roman symbol demonstrated the power of collectivism: fascist ideology prescribed that citizens subordinate self-interest to interest of the state.

It is estimated that 11 million people were killed during the Holocaust. Six million of these were Jews. The Nazis killed approximately two-thirds of all Jews living in Europe. Homosexuals, Gypsies and the mentally and physically disabled were equally subjected to mass extermination. An estimated 1.1 million children were murdered in the Holocaust.
Hitler’s charisma and his pursuit of support from wealthy industrialists and press barons increased Nazi popularity. In the July 1932 election, the Nazis won 37 percent of the popular vote, and held the largest delegation in the Reichstag. After long negotiations, President von Hindenburg appointed Hitler Chancellor on January 30, 1933.

Five days after his appointment, Hitler’s cabinet issued an emergency decree for “protection of the German people.” The decree banned political assemblies and marches, and thereby crippled any political campaigning opposed to Nazi interests. Civilian rights were further suspended when arson was committed against the Reichstag on February 27, 1933. Hitler’s government ascribed the fire to a Communist effort to overthrow the state, and took the opportunity to issue another emergency decree that eliminated all rights of assembly, freedom of speech, freedom of the press, and other constitutional protections. On March 23, 1933, Hitler passed the Enabling Acts, which abolished the Social Democratic Party, and permitted the Chancellor to enact laws without counsel or vote of the Reichstag. The Enabling Acts marked the collapse of the Weimar Republic, and the establishment of Hitler’s dictatorial Third Reich.
LJ: I was interested in what you said in Wrestling with Angels: that the German political right during the Weimar period had some similarity to the American political right, which at the time when you wrote the play, was the Bush Administration. What resonance does Bright Room have in our current political and social climate?

TK: Bright Room is about the collapse of democracy. I think democracy is always in peril. It is always dependent on the various groups that comprise the progressive community making common cause with one another. That failure to do so is illustrated in no point in history better than in the last couple years of the Weimar Republic. People need to know that the Holocaust didn't come from nowhere. People need to focus on what leads up to the Holocaust, what brings us to the point of genocide, to monstrous crimes against humanity. Bright Room is saying that the collapse of the Weimar Republic was not inevitable.

LJ: I'm in agreement with your warning that we must be wary of the “illusory comfort of our rooms.” It's so easy to allow ourselves to become consumed by our own day-to-day obligations; to be comfortable in our own spheres and removed from a very unstable and violent world… What's your sense of the level of political engagement in our country today?

TK: I feel that a respectable majority of people in this country are politically engaged with the fate of American democracy, and the fate of the planet, and look for ways in which to exercise historical agency. I always say that everybody has two jobs. My activism is not my playwriting. My playwriting is my playwriting. My activism is what I do to support political causes that I believe in. What I do for same sex marriage, the LGBTQ community, what I do in support of the Democratic Party. Those are the ways in which I attempt to have a direct impact on the world in which I live, and the plays are a way in which I have an indirect impact. Whatever their impact is, I know that I can't control it. When doing my theatre work, I focus on what I can control—my technique, the development of whatever talent I have, my growth as an artist. I ask myself if I'm finding some way to tell the truth about things, and then, for a sort of measurable, discernible impact on the world, I have to do the things people in all other occupations do: I have to agitate. I have to organize.

LJ: There's so much pressure nowadays for students to specialize immediately, and to immediately know their career tracks at a very young age. What advice do you have for students wishing to pursue a career in theatre?

TK: I don't think that the four years you spend as an undergraduate are necessarily best spent getting vocational training. I understand the economic pressures and panic that people are feeling the need to get a degree that will somehow connect with a career you imagine you're going to have—though I don't quite understand in what way getting a theatre degree is insurance against unemployment. I think that theatre degrees, for the most part, tend to be a training in theatre. I don't think that's what the four undergraduate years are really designed to do. I feel that committing oneself to a liberal arts scholarly discipline under the guidance of serious scholars, and spending those four years reading and writing, and learning how to read critically, and how to write analytically and critically is the best conceivable training. It almost doesn't matter what subject you study. What I think is ideal is if you leave academia after four years with a really vivid impression of what a life devoted to serious intellectual and academic pursuit is all about. What I mean by academia is learning at its farthest reaches—a way of engaging with reality, with ideas, with ideology, with history in a systematic and rigorous method. I think it's a very useful thing for people to get exposure to that. The only time in your life that you really set aside time for that (for anyone who can afford it) is the four years of undergraduate training. You never get another time in your life when the only thing you were supposed to be doing is reading and thinking and writing. And I think it's an important invention in civilization that we came up with a particular moment in a person's life that is made available to do this. I've always felt very grateful when I went to Columbia in 1974 there was no possibility of majoring in the theatre. At the moment when you're an undergraduate, your main job is not to prepare yourself for a career in the theatre, it is to relegate the theatre to the elective, pleasurable margins of your life and focus very, very much on training your brain. There's nothing more important than being able to read critically and insightfully—this is true for actors, this is true for designers, for directors, for playwrights. You gather around a rehearsal table and all you have holding your community together is the text. Being able to read that intelligently and thoughtfully is the only hope of producing anything of value onstage. It’s monumentally important that people get the training they need to do that.