A Few Notes from the Playwright About Staging

In General

Millennium Approaches and *Perestroika* are two parts of a single play, but at the same time they're two rather different plays, each with its own structure and character. *Millennium* has three acts and *Perestroika* has five. Three acts make a tauter, cleaner play, the gestures and rhythms of which will feel more inexorable, more destination-driven; a five-act play is likely to provide a more expansive, exploratory and ultimately open-ended and unresolved experience. Perhaps it can be said that *Millennium* is a play about security and certainty being blown apart, while *Perestroika* is about danger and possibility following the explosion. The events in *Perestroika* proceed from the wreckage made by the Angel's traumatic entry at the end of *Millennium.* A membrane has broken; there is disarray and debris. All of which is to suggest that, especially when the

two parts of *Angels* are produced in repertory, the differences should be visible and palpable onstage.

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. Actors need to help by playing the reality of these locations: How loud can you get, really, in a fancy restaurant?

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.

Intermissions

Audiences are said to have grown increasingly impatient and unwilling to sit through long evenings in the theater. The people of whom this is true will likely seek out shorter plays than *Angels in America*. I believe that, once engaged, audiences rediscover the rewards of patience and effort and the pleasures of an epic journey. An epic play *should* be a little fatiguing; a rich, heady, hard-earned fatigue is among a long journey's pleasures and rewards.

That said, the audience has to be given chances along the way to gather its strength and attention. *Millennium Approaches* is a long play, and *Perestroika* is longer. Each play is meant to have two intermissions, after Act One and Act Two of *Millennium*, and after Act Three and Act Four of *Perestroika*. These segments are shaped to function as coherent single events as well as successions of scenes.

The temptation to take only one intermission in each of the two parts should, in my opinion, be resisted. Although

one intermission shortens the running time, the demands it puts on the audience's attention and the pressures it puts on the scenes immediately before the single intermission or near the end of the play are unnecessary, detrimental and counterproductive—the running time may be shorter, but it will feel much longer.

Magic

The moments of magic, such as the appearance and disappearance of Mr. Lies, the ghosts, Prior's fiery Book hallucination and the Angel's arrival, ought to be fully imagined and realized, as wonderful *theatrical* illusions—which means it's OK if the wires show, and maybe it's good that they do, but the magic should at the same time be thoroughly thrilling, fantastical, amazing.

It's easy to stage a person's (or a ghost's) magical disappearance by simply having the actor exit into the wings, but I don't think that's a strong choice. Not only is it *not* thoroughly thrilling, fantastical, amazing or fun to watch a person walk offstage, it's also pedestrian, literally and figuratively. Walking offstage is slow, and therefore it lacks one very important aspect of *vanishing*—namely that it's abrupt. In a world in which young people by their thousands sicken and, with obscene speed, die (in other words, the world of this play), vanishing abruptly is particularly upsetting, even frightening. The magic ought to be fun for the audience, but also disturbing. For Prior, it's increasingly terrifying.

There's more magic in *Perestroika*, and as the play progresses, the magic gets grander. It's hard to make this happen: long, two-part plays are enormously demanding of resources, time and energy, and there's always the risk that invention,

attention to detail, time and cash will run out just when they're needed most, in the play's home stretch. *Perestroika*'s fifth-act Heaven scenes should, whether or not the stage directions are followed, at the very least resemble nothing on Earth; the Hall of the Continental Principalities in Act Five, Scene 5, ought to be the high point of the stage magic of *Angels*.

Split Scenes

In the split scenes, two separate events occur more or less simultaneously in different locations—for example, Act One, Scene 8, of *Millennium Approaches*, in which we observe Harper and Joe in their living room in Brooklyn and Louis and Prior in their Alphabetland bedroom. Both events are intended to continue, active and alive, throughout the entire split scene, with focus going where the story needs it to go. Stopping one of the two events in its tracks by artificially freezing it is an easy but again, in my opinion, not a strong choice. The trick is to work out psychologically coherent (hence playable), compellingly dramatic reasons why the characters in one event become still and quiet when the action that the audience should be attending to shifts to the other event and onto other characters.

When a character chooses to stop talking, to be still and quiet, for reasons having to do with the conflict he or she is in during a scene, an active choice is being made, and hence the character stays alive onstage—as opposed to being put in suspended animation by the director. Finding concurrent, complementary vitality in the two events of a split scene gives them their particular dynamism; they'll be much more fun to play, and to watch.

Language

The engine of the play is the struggle in which the characters engage to change unendurable circumstances—*all* the characters, *all* the time we're watching them. The circumstances the characters face, the world they inhabit, and the characters themselves are in a very important sense made up of words.

Words are important, and they're specific. We speak to produce effects, to catalyze, to engender consequences. We choose words strategically, precisely, whether or not we do so consciously.

If the character you're playing says something that strikes you, the actor, as odd, large, artificial, you should assume it strikes your character that way as well. If a character opposite yours says something that sounds ornate, awkward, a non-sequitur to you, the actor, it probably sounds that way to your character too.

I advise taking very seriously and working hard to answer the question that you, the actor, and probably also the character you're playing, are longing to ask: Why am I/Why is this other person talking this way? That question is important. When the language in the play is strange, in other words, its strangeness is always an action. A sentence is no less an action than a blow with a broadsword or a passionate kiss. And the degree and kind of strangeness matter enormously.

The characters in the play are fighting for survival; the stakes are very high. They talk to make things happen, to advance an agenda, to defend, to enlist, to seduce, to punish. Sometimes they speak in an effort to understand how or what they're feeling. But never speak solely to announce your character's distress, hoping for pity. The characters in the play are tougher than that; the world of the play, like the world outside the theater, is a tough place.

Two Notes Regarding Pronunciation

On page 156, Roy's coinage, "azido-methatalo-molamoca-whatchamacallit" is pronounced "aZIDOmuhTHATUHLO-moluhmocuh-whatchamacallit." The "I" in "ZIDO" is short, as in "in," and the "TH" in "*TH*ATUHLO" is soft, as in "*TH*istle."

On page 224, Prior is using the verb "prophesy," which is pronounced "proph-uh-sigh," *not* the noun "prophecy" which is pronounced "proph-uh-see."

Nine Notes Regarding the Angel

The Angel, who is related to humans but isn't human, is arguably the most challenging character in *Angels*, and Act Two of *Perestroika* is inarguably the most challenging sequence. After two decades of struggling with her and watching others struggle, I'm offering these thoughts, which I hope will be helpful.

1) *Metaphysics:* I'll begin by repeating: The Angel is related to humans but isn't human. That's the primary challenge in acting, directing and designing her. For starters, she refers to herself in the plural (I I I I) because she isn't a single thing: She is a Principality, which is, depending on which angelological ordering system you subscribe to, the highest or one of the highest types among the angelic orders. She is four Divine Emanations—Lumen (blue), Candle (gold), Phosphor (green) and Fluor (purple)—manifest as an aggregate entity, the Continental Principality of America. I have no advice about how to play four nonhuman beings amalgamated into one nonhuman being. I only know that while she should be comprehensible to the audience, she should also be terribly unfamiliar.

2) *Appearance:* She should be extraordinary to behold, and her wings are of paramount importance—they should move and they should move us. She shouldn't look like Botticelli painted her, or any other Italian Renaissance painter, or any European of any period, or like a traditional Christmas tree ornament. She should look breathtaking, severe, scary, powerful, and magnificently American.

3) *Her Cough:* The Angel's cough is a manifestation of cosmic unwellness, but she controls it, and she is a creature of unimaginable strength and discipline. She doesn't want Prior to sense any weakness, disorder or confusion on her part, and her cough ought to be a single, dry bark, *not* prolonged wracking emphysemic spasms. Ellen McLaughlin, who created the role, based her brusque, even angry rap of a cough on a cat hacking up a furball. It was startling, sharp, simple—one *hack*, not ten—and effectively nonhuman, not funny as much as disconcerting and ominous, and always always *dignified.* It did not make her seem frail.

4) *She's Not Joking, and She's No Joke:* Some of what happens between Prior and the Angel is supposed to be funny, but it's essential for the play, and, for that matter, for the comedy, that the Angel's dignity and her unequivocally serious purpose are never—as in *not for one single second!*—compromised by schticky winking at the audience. Prior's terror at being in her presence and/or at the possibility that he's going mad never (as in not for one single second) abandons him. As Prior has his first full encounter with the Angel, and simultaneously relates it to Belize three weeks later, we're watching a cosmically high-stakes encounter between a badly frightened but very brave human being and his furious, grief-stricken, frightened and frighteningly powerful nonhuman visitor/intruder.

Apologies if I'm sounding strident, but I've learned that there are dire consequences if this reality is parodied or traduced. People can enjoy pratfalls, mugging and easy laughs, even while determining that they won't be fooled again into deep investment in what's proved to be unserious. Once faith in the seriousness of what's onstage has been withdrawn, however briefly, it's unlikely to return fully.

5) *Her Arrival:* If at all technically feasible, the Angel should arrive in Prior's bedroom by crashing through the ceiling. This is harder than bringing her through a crack in the rear wall, which is what's usually done. But she's coming down from Heaven, not from across town; it's a drop-down-on-your-head explosive revelation, rather than the sneaky, sideways kind. If at all possible, she should arrive in dust and noise as the ceiling rains down on Prior's head. I didn't know, when I wrote the play, that so few theaters have fly space.

6) *Flying Versus Rehearsing*: I also didn't know how difficult stage flying would prove to be. Originally I imagined that the Angel would fly during Act Two of *Perestroika*, doing spectacular aerial stunts as she spoke. I've seen many productions of *Perestroika*, and I've never seen this happen. What I've seen instead is many valuable hours of rehearsal and tech time lost, and much money spent hiring stage-flying specialists, trying to make this happen.

I've come to the conviction that attempting extensive flying is not only unwise, because it lies beyond the technical and temporal means of most theaters, it's a distraction from the real business at hand. The Anti-Migratory Epistle sequence in Act Two won't be solved by Angelic midair somersaults—which, trust me, will never materialize. The effectiveness of this long and difficult scene depends entirely on getting its

complex realities clear, specific and playable, and that means time-consuming, painstaking, actor-director rehearsal-room work, for which there is no substitute.

7) *Unhooking the Angel:* There *should* be flying, of course: The Angel should fly in, and fly out, carrying the Epistle. In between her entrance and her exit, she has to be able to move around the stage, so that she can interact fully with Prior and, when appropriate, with Belize. This most likely means that she will have to be unhooked from her flying rig onstage while the scene is in progress, and then hooked back up. Stagehands, visible to the audience, can do this. Her fly-wires show, so why not visible stagehands? Stagehands ought to help Prior out of his prophet garb and into his pajamas in the transition from the street to his bedroom and back again.

Openly including the crew in the stage life in Act Two (when necessary for the storytelling, not as an embellishment) seems to me consonant with the act's mixing narrated and dramatized storytelling, an amalgam which occurs at no other point in *Angels*. Moments when the crew takes active part in the dramatic event should be staged—interesting to watch, specific and unapologetic, not artificially slow but not rushed and frantic. Prior's change of clothes, from prophet drag to pajamas, is part of a transition he's chosen to undertake. He's stepping into a violent memory because telling Belize isn't enough; Prior has to show him. When the stagehands unhook the Angel, they should do so respectfully; it goes without saying that they wouldn't touch her without her willing them to do so.

8) *Staging the Anti-Migratory Epistle:* Act Two confronts directors, actors and designers with the formidable (but, I hope, exciting and enjoyable) challenge of staging three characters

occupying two locations that are separated, albeit permeably and not cleanly, by distance and time.

This is a scene involving *three* characters: Prior, the Angel and Belize. There's a temptation to sideline Belize to a stationary spot on the outskirts and leave him there for the duration, tossing in quips, irrelevant to the action. This is a tempting choice because it makes the scene easier to stage. The problem is that without Belize's active involvement, the scene makes no sense. The overarching actions are the Angel's arrival, the delivery of the Epistle, Prior's refusal of it, and then his unwilling acceptance of or forced submission to it. But the scene takes place in the present as well as in the past, and integral to the event is the in-the-bedroom/on-the-street contest between Belize and the Angel for Prior's attention and soul, a battle of three strong wills that propels/pulls Belize into Prior's bedroom, into his awful dream—where, once he's entered, the Angel seems intermittently to be aware of Belize's presence.

Belize is tough, but Prior unfolds for him what must sound, to a nurse with considerable experience dealing with AIDS, like a wholly unfamiliar form of dementia, far more coherent than anything Belize has heard from his patients. He's bewildered, grief-stricken, and, when Prior's delusions assume uncharacteristically, deeply disturbing reactionary, even racist overtones, Belize becomes frightened and then angry. Thus Prior's desperate attempt to end his loneliness by telling his best friend about the waking nightmare in which he's trapped results in even greater isolation.

9) *Her Broken Heart:* The Angel's power and purpose semi-successfully conceal an abandoned lover's determination to get her lost love to return before everything falls apart. Prior is supposed to be useful, as surrogate for his species, the last fragile hope of averting universal extinction. But to the heart-

broken lover that this heavenly emissary also is, he's a hateful, guilty homewrecker who also happens to be her kin and her ward. In this predicament the Angel is recognizable to Prior, to Belize and to us, and she grows more familiar as the Epistle progresses, but only to a point. As I began, so I'll end: the Angel isn't human.