

*By James Fisher*

***'In an era of wrenching social changes, political theatre is important,' Kushner told my students.***

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found in plays by Tennessee Williams and John Guare have influenced Kushner, but he is closer in spirit to Henrik Ibsen, George Bernard Shaw, and especially Bertolt Brecht, w

***Kushner's visit and the production of his play triggered a year-long local skirmish in the culture wars.***

examining the issues at hand.”<sup>5</sup>

Kushner attributed his interest in political theatre to his childhood in Louisiana, where he encountered both mild anti-Semitism and more virulent homophobia.

After his meeting with the class, Kushner gave a dynamic public lecture to an enthusiastic full house. The privilege of introducing him fell to me, and I announced that, after all, our Theatre Department's next season would begin with a production of *Millennium Approaches*.

I didn't realize it at the time, but Kushner's visit and the announcement of the production triggered what became a year-long local skirmish in the culture wars.

**F**rightened administrators, confused alumni and local citizens, angry canon-worshippers, the politically correct, and the media all came out of the woodwork for what became a test of the meaning of academic freedom and the role of the artist in a community.

Things spun out of control at once. What might have been a minor controversy was exaggerated by the presence on campus of a student-run, right-wing publication calling itself *The Commentary*.

Largely the work of two students, this publication had emerged on campus a year or so before Kushner's visit. The publication

was backed by a small but wealthy group of conservative alumni (and, as I would later learn, a few members of the college's Board of Trustees), and, at various times, its banner noted that the publication received financial support from an array of national conservative organizations.

In the pages of *The Commentary*, a philosophy course on the Holocaust was condemned as “trendy,” reading *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* was ridiculed, and the showing of such films as Martin Scorsese's *The Last Temptation of Christ* was called “shameful.” A faculty member's voting record was reported (inaccurately), and other staff were treated to biased and offensively personal reviews of campus lectures and publications. One particularly repugnant *Commentary* tactic: those students the publication suspected of being gay were referred in print as “fragile” individuals.

Snooping in wastebaskets, calling past employers of staff in hopes of finding “dirt,” and starting unfounded rumors became standard practice. By boldly claiming the right to define the sides and frame the issues, *The Commentary* caught Wabash College off-guard.

Wabash's president, Andrew T. Ford, and his administration were in full panic by the time we announced the production of



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danced around the issue, I pointedly asked if he was asking the Theatre Department to reconsider doing the play.

The president said no, but made it clear that our discussions were not over.

My second meeting with Ford two weeks later was largely a repeat of the first, with different strategies employed on both sides. The president tested the waters with a game of "What If?" What would happen if he should ask us not to do the play? I replied that this question convinced me he wanted to ask us not to do the play.

When he didn't answer, I asked if he had, in fact, received negative responses from alumni. He replied that at least one alumnus had expressed his "outrage" at discovering Wabash was going to put on "a play with two guys screwing each other."

It became clear that the real problem stemmed from a practical brand of homophobia. Ford and other concerned parties might not actually fear gays, but they did fear the presumed impact on "conservative" donors and the "marketing" of the college. Alumniphobia might be a more accurate term.

Ford pointed out that some individuals believed putting on the play was tantamount to condoning, celebrating, or recommending the "gay lifestyle," a religious and polit-

ical problem for many.

Fair enough, I responded, but at the point where their beliefs overrode the rights of others to study and explore the issues, something of greater significance seemed to be at stake: academic freedom.

**E**xamining difficult, controversial, unsettling, and unpopular viewpoints is, in my view, essential to a college's long-term health, which is why I left my meetings with President Ford annoyed that we had now spent in excess of three hours with no conclusion in sight. If the president was not asking us to reconsider, or hoping to pressure us into a reconsideration, why did we need to talk again?

This time, I didn't keep my meeting with the president secret. I replayed both encounters to colleagues in the arts at the college, telling them I felt the president was applying pressure. No one had ever challenged a play selection, so what else could it suggest? A sudden interest in drama on his part?

The controversy came to a head when the college's humanities faculty learned of my meetings with the president. There was a small uproar that ended with the president being invited to a division meeting to respond to questions on academic freedom.

Annoyed by the president's insistence that I raised the sugges-

***The president's view was that work with a public component wasn't protected by academic freedom.***

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tion of a meeting to discuss the play in the first place, I wrote asking him why would I initiate a discussion about whether or not to do the play when I'd just attained the rights to do it after strenuously seeking them?

**R**egardless of who initiated the talks, I stressed in an E-mail, he "shouldn't have applied pressure, even if it was unintentional, and having done it and realized that it was being felt that way--as I clearly expressed in each of our meetings--you should have stopped it and indicated that it was wrong."









***We had the largest audiences ever for a Wabash play, and each performance ended with a standing ovation.***

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ty, and called every conceivable

point, little is offensive enough to warrant the controversy that has arisen over presenting this play on the campus of a conservative mid-western men's college."<sup>18</sup>

Eric Pfeffinger, *Arts Indiana's* critic, followed suit, noting:

Wabash's funny and moving production of *Angels* conveyed the intellect and the chutzpa of Kushner's quite remarkable play."<sup>19</sup>

In utter relief, I was quoted as saying, "I'm very proud of the students." That's been the greatest thing about this."<sup>20</sup>

All of us seek to know what of value can be taken from any experience, and there were some obvious lessons to be learned in this case.

The embattled cast became a family like none I have ever experienced, rehearsing and performing the play in a galvanized state, admirably committed to the project despite the extraordinary external pressures.

A few close friends offered moral support, both publicly and privately. My wife, who acted in the production, and our two children provided unwavering love and encouragement.

Members of the campus and local gay community, many carefully closeted, found ways to show sup-

port for the production and the effort to get it on.

One such expression, written by Wabash sophomore Joydeep Sengupta, took the form of a poem that touched me deeply. It seemed to me then, and does now, that Joydeep instinctively understood the need for a play like *Angels* in a society, both the small one of Wabash and the larger American community, struggling to know its own mind.

A dialogue, however divisive, had begun and it would continue. For now, some quarters of Wabash, like American society in general, resist equality, respect for, and greater openness, for gays.

Joydeep's view of the future, as expressed in his poem and the play that inspired it, reflects Kushner's belief in the inevitability of change and the sacrifices that must be made:

Young man of 2040, Greetings from a darker Time! Out of the shadows of my crumbling nightmare, I watch your careless Freedom emerge. Not Half-living in an airless closet, You are Unafraid and Unashamed and Young. Your Body is unfettered, your voice strengthened by all our Anonymous, Unchronicled Wars. ■

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> George Bernard Shaw. *Shaw on Theatre*. New York: Hill & Wang, p. 58.

<sup>2</sup> Gerald Graff. *Beyond the Culture Wars. How Teaching the Conflicts Can Revitalize American Education*. New York: W.W. Norton, 1992, p. 10.

<sup>3</sup> Bob Blanchard, "Playwright of Pain and Hope," *Progressive Magazine*, October

York: Theatre Communications Group, 1992, 1993, p. 57.

<sup>7</sup> Barb Albert, "Panel Weighs Controversial Drama, Excludes Playwright," *Indianapolis Star*, October 9, 1996, p. B7.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> "Freedom and Responsibility in a Liberal Arts Community," *Wabash Magazine*, Winter 1996, p. 48.

<sup>13</sup> Albert, "Panel Weighs Controversial Drama, Excludes Playwright," p. B7.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Lawrence Biemiller, "Notes from Academe: Angels in America Challenges Students at Wabash College," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, October 18, 1996, p. B2.

<sup>17</sup> Marion Garmel, "Wabash Cast Triumphant in Play About Fallibility and Forgiveness," *Indianapolis Star*, October 11, 1996, p. E1.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Eric Pfeffinger, "Theatre Review: Angels

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