Angels at the National and Bohemians in the West End: Transposing and Reviving American dramatic depictions of AIDS to the British stage in *Angels in America* and *Rent*

Submitted in accordance with the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Cardiff Metropolitan University

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DECLARATION

This work has not previously been accepted in substance for any degree and is not being concurrently submitted in candidature for any degree.

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STATEMENT 1

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Acknowledgements

“In this world, there is a kind of painful progress. Longing for what we've left behind, and dreaming ahead.”

This work is first dedicated to all those who have suffered as a result of HIV/AIDS, and the artists who have chosen to speak for them. And with thanks to the inspiration behind this, Tony Kushner for the words, Jonathan Larson for the music, for not only shaping this work but my life through their words.

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Abstract

This study focuses on two highly successful AIDS plays, Tony Kushner’s *Angels in America* and Jonathan Larson’s *Rent*. These plays were performed in London in 1994 and 1998 respectively and revived in 2007. Both plays are key examples of American theatrical representations of AIDS performed on the London stage. This thesis examines how these plays represented AIDS on the London stage. Secondly, the reception of these American AIDS plays is considered when staged in London is considered. Finally, the longer-term significance of performing these texts, both in terms of depictions of AIDS and the wider stylistic elements in relation to the theatrical landscape is also examined. Through reflection on the reception of these plays, they are considered for their significance of their depiction of AIDS and place within London theatre. It is examined how, through the use of political, medical and emotional ties, these plays successfully depicted AIDS when transposed to the British stage. In these successful depictions of AIDS, and in their overall press reception, these plays developed a significant place in the London theatrical landscape. Using archival records and press responses, the performance of these plays in their original production and in revival is considered in relation to the original productions and the revived versions in London. The consideration of live, performed versions of these texts is of central importance, and further theoretical consideration is built around the nature of a performance text. In using archival records, elements of the productions and performance are considered in a manner that is not possible if only using the published, written version of the play. These plays are considered as significant works on AIDS that transposed successfully to the London theatrical landscape, making *Angels* and *Rent* not only but successful and important parts of the British theatrical landscape.
Frequently used words and acronyms

AIDS

Acronym for ‘Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome’ AIDS is a result of infection by the HIV virus (see below). A person has AIDS if they have one or more specific OIs, certain cancers, or a very low number of CD4 cells. If you have AIDS, you will need medical intervention and treatment to prevent death. The name was first coined in 1982.

AZT

Acronym for azidothymidine, a drug used in the treatment of AIDS.

HIV

Acronym for human immunodeficiency virus, the virus that leads to AIDS. It is a lentivirus (slowly replicating retrovirus) that enters the bloodstream through exchange of bodily fluids. The HIV virus was first identified in 1986.

The National Theatre

The National Theatre of Great Britain, established in 1963 and opened in 1977 at its location on the South Bank of the River Thames in London. The Queen is the patron, and its official title is The Royal National Theatre.

Musical Theatre

Theatrical performance that includes song and music as a predominant element of its storytelling. Also likely to include components of dance/movement.

Perestroika

Is the title of Angels in America, part 2. It refers to the political reforms associated with Gorbachev. The term means ‘restructuring’ and was used to denote economic restructuring that Gorbachev intended. At the time of Kushner’s writing it was seen as a hopeful step from an American point of view towards change in Russia and the Eastern bloc. In the intervening years it has been viewed as less successful.

WASP

American acronym for ‘White Anglo Saxon Protestant.’ It generally refers to an upper-middle class branch of Americans who trace their origins back to high ranking families in Europe.
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Chapter 1 Angels at the National and Bohemians in the West End

1.1 Introduction

In 1994, Tony Kushner’s *Angels in America*¹ opened for its first full production at The National Theatre in London. Four years later, Jonathan Larson’s *Rent*² opened in the West End. The London production took place at the Shaftsbury Theatre and opened on May 12th 1998. These two performance texts, radically different in theatrical form and approach, place AIDS at the centre of their narrative. In 2007, both *Angels* and *Rent* were revived in London within months of each other.³ The analysis of these productions, in the context of London theatre, forms the basis of this thesis.

1.1.1 Context

The response to AIDS through performance, in New York and London, forms a significant cultural response to the AIDS epidemic that began in 1981. This study focuses on these two specific examples of New York theatrical depictions of AIDS on the London stage, *Angels in America* and *Rent*. It examines both their significance and influence on depictions of AIDS and their impact as theatrical works. *Angels* and *Rent* have been chosen because they are the most well-known productions to deal with AIDS staged in London. These plays are described as ‘transposed’ to the London stage, meaning to transfer to a different place or context. These plays, performed in London, are essentially the same but their context is altered. It is this transposed context that makes this particular study of the plays a unique approach.

The motivation for the study is supported by my personal experience which influences my response to, and analysis of, these texts in contrast to those who have examined them previously. A British woman, born in 1984, I have never known a world without AIDS, and I have few memories of the period *Angels* and *Rent* are set in. I am not a gay man, I am not a person living with HIV, and I therefore do not expect to feel the same direct attachment or effects from these play texts as someone who falls into either or both of these categories. Culturally I am distant from the texts, not only in the era that they depict but also in terms of

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³ *Angels* was revived at the Lyric Hammersmith from 8th June-22 July 2007. *Rent*, which was re-branded as *Rent: Remixed* was revived at the Duke of York’s Theatre and ran from 16 October 2007-February 2nd 2008.
nationality, gender and sexuality. As a British woman who has lived in North America⁴ I have an understanding of North American culture but my cultural upbringing and bias is British. My readings of these play texts is inevitably affected by my age, sexuality and nationality. I wanted to examine these texts because from my first encounter with them I was moved by them, and felt a connection to what the playwrights were communicating.

I have a strong understanding of the London theatrical landscape. I have, at the time of writing been attending theatre in London for over fifteen years, both in the more traditional ‘West End’ venues and beyond to off-West End and Fringe performances. My initial interest was in musical theatre but I have through personal interest and study developed a wide range of theatrical interests. As a result I have seen a wide range of theatre in London. I consider myself to have a strong understanding and experience of the London theatrical landscape and its dynamics through first-hand experience. I have also been attending theatre in New York for over 10 years on an annual basis and consider myself to have a good understanding of the dynamics of New York theatre. My personal interest in theatre, keeping abreast of news and reviews from theatre in both London and New York has meant I have an informed perspective on the dynamics of London and New York theatre scenes. As an engaged theatre fan, I make use of, and engage with online discussion and fan activity. This facet informs my overall understanding of theatre and theatre fans, an aspect touched upon in Chapters 5 and 6. In summary, my personal engagement with theatre in London and New York both professionally and personally has informed and shaped my understanding of these theatrical landscapes.

My personal academic background has led me to the particular approach to the study taken here. Having studied history originally before moving into a practical-led study of drama, I feel I am able to consider the nuances of the performed text both in their dramatic and socio-historical context. I have gained experience in analysis of historical sources through my experience as a historian. As a specialist in twentieth century history, I have the context and understanding of the period analysed here. Having worked with historical sources and archives previously, I am able to adapt this approach and skill set to the study of these plays. In my study of drama I have gained both theoretical textual understanding and practical experience. This previous experience allows me to understand the mechanisms of staging performance, and therefore use the archival records effectively. It is my aim to bring these disciplinary backgrounds together using my previous academic skills and experience.

The study uses archival materials both from Britain⁵ and America,⁶ which is a comparatively unusual research method. My background in history, through my undergraduate study, and practical experience in theatre-making through my Master’s degree, inspired this multi-disciplinary approach.

It is acknowledged that there is a wide range of AIDS related performance, both from London, New York and beyond that could have been considered here. The wider spectrum of AIDS performance, and related Gay theatre, is acknowledged⁷ and informs the context of this case study approach. The productions considered in this study were chosen due to their prominence: because they were staged at the National Theatre and in the West End, their influence is more wide-ranging than the smaller fringe pieces that preceded them in the UK. These texts hold AIDS at the centre of their narrative but represent a range of theatrical approaches to addressing the epidemic and responding to the condition. *Angels* and *Rent* are among a wide variety of performative and cultural responses to AIDS, which are explored in more detail in Chapter 2.

These works are very different works. One (*Angels*) is a seven hour, two-part play; the other (*Rent*) a contemporary rock musical. Yet they are well positioned for comparison, both because of their central concern with AIDS, and because they are both imported American works. The focus here is the imported American texts and their depiction of AIDS as viewed on the London stage. The fact that these works were later revived within the same year (2007) allows for a sustained analysis of transposing American theatrical texts dealing with AIDS to the London stage. Chapter 1 will outline the rationale behind this study in the context of previous academic analysis and theoretical approaches relating to the study. Chapter 2 will then consider the historical and theatrical context against which these plays were staged.

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⁵ Specifically, the Archives of the National Theatre and the Victoria and Albert Museum theatre division.
⁶ Specifically, the theatre collections of the New York Public Library and the Theatre on Film and Tape Archive.
⁷ More detailed work on Gay theatre can be found in two of John M Clum’s works; *Still Acting Gay Male Homosexuality in Modern Drama*, St Martin’s Griffin, New York, 2000 and *Something for the Boys, Musical theater and Gay culture*, St Martin’s Press, New York, 2001. In addition Nicholas de Jongh’s *Not in Front of the Audience; Homosexuality on Stage*, Routledge, London, 1992 offers further insight into Gay drama on the British stage.
In light of the above, three research questions have been formulated to give focus to the study. They are as follows:

- How well did these American plays about AIDS transpose to the London stage and how did they depict AIDS in performance?
- What response did these plays receive in London, in their original production and in revival?
- What is the significance of these plays in relation to the depiction of AIDS in theatre and the theatrical landscape in London?

1.2 Approaches to the plays

The depiction of AIDS in each play will be examined through various means: its physical depiction and impact upon the characters through physical depictions, the use of language to discuss the condition, and the narrative effect on the characters. Reception of these plays within Britain will then be considered alongside their depictions of AIDS and their place in the socio-cultural theatrical space, here termed the ‘theatrical landscape.’ The ‘theatrical landscape’ refers to the spectrum of performance across a given time or area. In this case the London theatrical scene at the time the plays were staged. The umbrella term of ‘theatrical landscape’ allows for consideration of the broader context in which these plays were staged, taking in not only similar plays but the spectrum of performance across a specified theatrical landscape. As noted later in the chapter, the full spectrum of London or British and American theatre cannot be considered in detail. However in placing these performance texts within the broader context their significance can be better considered.

Particular attention will be paid to the National Theatre and the plays which were in repertory alongside *Angels*, and to the West End theatrical landscape at the time *Rent* was playing. Finally, the longer term significance of depictions of AIDS in London theatre will be examined in terms of the wider stylistic effect on the theatrical landscape. In considering the revived versions of these plays, which took place in 2007, the texts may be reconsidered in a different context. By assessing these texts in both in their original and revived version, the longer term impact and legacy in relation to both depictions of AIDS on the London stage
may be considered. Studying these plays over twenty years after the original productions, and several years after the revival, provides an interesting perspective.

1.2.1 Archival research

The approach in this study uses archival research as a primary means of analysis. This, combined with more traditional textual analysis, and use of press response to the plays, uses my experience in historical study alongside performance analysis. The archive includes a variety of archival sources which have been examined include production notes, costume designs, set blueprints, rehearsal photographs and recordings. No published study to date has considered these texts using these archival resources to this extent. This approach therefore aims to provide a more rounded, detailed insight into these texts and on their depiction of AIDS on the London stage. The potential challenges and problems posed by the archival approach such as incomplete records are acknowledged throughout the thesis. As noted, even when using recordings of a performance alongside the performance archival record, it is impossible to recreate the lived experience of performance.

Scholarly work on the use of the archive, particularly Carolyn Steedman’s work on ‘archivisation’ is also acknowledged. And, while I agree with Steedman’s assertion theoretically that an over-reliance on archival work could be problematic for history and social sciences, I also view the use of the archive as necessary and illuminating. In this instance, it helps to capture another element of performance that is lost after the production closes. In using archival record, traces of that performance survive and may be considered by those of us who were not able to witness that performance first hand.

The use of archives can be problematic, both in relation to content archived and personal access to this content. Access to the physical archive and access to specific content may often be difficult. In this study, the ability to travel and utilise archives posed a challenge to expanding the archival work. In the first instance, access to the archive became difficult practically because international travel was involved in getting to it. In the second, it was not possible to access substantial archival records relating to Jonathan Larson in the Library of Congress. In addition what was accessed in the archive is relative to availability at that point in time, and the restrictions of particular archives. The use of archives does not replace the experience of viewing a live performance; however they can enhance understanding of a text.

8 Steedman, Carolyn, Dust; The Archive and Cultural History Rutgers University Press, New York, 2002.
In the context of this study, the use of archives both in London and New York has enhanced and added originality to the work.

The records archived - which included costume records, stage design and stage manager’s notes - also help to ‘bring to life’ the performance even when not personally experienced. With a certain level of understanding and professional expertise, the reading of a ‘bible copy’ - the version of the text used by the stage manager to ‘call’ a show\(^9\) - can help build a detailed picture of that play in performance. While one cannot presume to understand creative decisions from viewing these materials, an understanding of the creative process can aid comprehension of the production. For example, looking through design ideas and script notes can provide a deeper insight into bringing the performance to the stage.\(^{10}\) This means that through the information in this script a fuller picture of the performance can be gathered. Reading such a script requires some knowledge of theatre and the stage manager and various backstage roles in order to understand the cues and abbreviations.

Drawing on my previous training and experience I am able to fully understand such instructions so in reading the prompt scripts for Angels and Rent I was able to gather a full picture of the play in performance. Other documents archived included costume designs and related notes, stage blueprints, production and rehearsal photographs.\(^{11}\) All of these serve to illuminate the performance further. Archival materials have also been examined to gain additional information about the plays in performance. This does not replace the live experience of seeing the plays; however they provide valuable production information.

The archives used in completing this research were theatre specific archives which specialise in creating archival records for performance. These were: the V&A Theatre and Performance Archives,\(^{12}\) and the National Theatre Archives,\(^{13}\) both in London. In addition the

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\(^9\) Meaning to give direction to all those involved in the performance, for example give lighting and sound cues, to call actors to the stage or initiate scene changes. Every nuance of a performance is recorded in the prompt script or ‘Bible copy’.

\(^{10}\) In this instance the main records used were the ‘Bible’ or stage manager’s copy of the script. This copy contains both the playwright’s original script alongside all the instructions needed to stage the show every night. The stage manager, who ‘calls’ the show (gives instructions to the actors and backstage teams) has in their copy all of the information needed for each show. This means such scripts have listings of entrances and exits for actors, sound and music information, costume changes and lighting cues.

\(^{11}\) A full listing of archival materials used is found in the Bibliography.

\(^{12}\) The Victoria and Albert museum archives have theatre specific branch housed within its archive. Collected through donations as with the rest of the collections, it’s listing for individual performances vary greatly. Details of the collection and listings are found here <www.vam.ac.uk/content/articles/t/archives-theatre-performance> accessed, June 14th 2014.

\(^{13}\) The National Theatre archives hold records on the general history of the National Theatre. This includes recordings of productions (every production since the late 1990s) as well as interviews, platform events and other special events. Full details and listings may be found at <www.nationaltheatre.org.uk/discover-more/archive> June 14th 2014.
New York Public Library, Billy Rose Theatre Collection\textsuperscript{14} and Theatre on Film and Tape archive,\textsuperscript{15} in New York. These archives were chosen due to the content and records held. The V&A archive in London holds general records for London theatre, while the National Theatre archive holds records for productions at the National itself and productions with some select associate companies for collaborative productions. In the New York archives, similar to the V&A general records for New York theatre are held. The Theatre on Film and Tape archive holds recordings of Broadway and Off-Broadway recordings. This archival work forms an integral part of the original contribution of my analysis. Using the National Theatre’s substantial record on Angels in particular gave an insight into the production that viewing the production alone could not do. Likewise, the use of the American archives to gain detailed information about the Broadway production of Rent, and to view other related productions on recording, was invaluable in creating context for this study.

The materials accessed in the archives varied substantially due to there being no central body for archiving theatrical records in either country. The National Theatre archives hold detailed records for all of their productions, including the previously mentioned scripts and other documentation. Other archives vary greatly, the V&A for the plays examined had programmes and press cuttings relating to the plays but little else. In the New York archive there were similar press cuttings and recordings of radio and television interviews associated with the plays. In addition the NYPL held a prompt script for Rent and The Normal Heart the latter, as with viewing the recording, was useful in contextualising these plays in the spectrum of AIDS performance. Likewise listening and viewing radio and television interviews associated with various AIDS plays allowed for further contextual understanding of the period of theatre history as did viewing the archival records of AIDS activism charity ACT UP, held at the New York Public Library. These historical records detailed protests and publications relating to the group in the years concurrent to the plays studied and allowed for a deeper understanding of the context in which Angels and Rent were performed in New York.

The archival records were useful in providing information where viewing the original production was not possible. For this aspect of research the Theatre on Tape and film archive

\textsuperscript{14} The Billy Rose Theatre Collection is part of the New York Public Library archive collections. The records cover a wide range of performance across American from the 18\textsuperscript{th} Century onwards. Full details can be found here; <www.nypl.org/locations/lpa/billy-rose-theatre-division> accessed, June 14\textsuperscript{th} 2014

\textsuperscript{15} The Theatre on Tape and Film archive is a division of the Billy Rose Theatre Collection and holds recordings of a wide range of theatrical performance as well as associated interviews and documentaries. <www.nypl.org/locations/lpa/theatre-film-and-tape-archive> accessed, June 14\textsuperscript{th} 2014.
was particularly useful. In a practical sense this means a substantial record of recorded productions available to view. Recordings of the original London productions are not available for the original *Angels* or *Rent* with the original cast, and there are no archival recordings available. However recordings of both were available in the New York archives. Therefore I was able to view the 1994 Broadway version via a video recording. The recordings made by the Theatre archives in New York are largely made by fixed camera from the rear of the stalls. These provide an overview and audience member eye view of the performance, and are made with an audience present. The dates of these recordings, in the mid to late 1990s, mean that the recording technology is not as advanced as in more recent years and therefore the sound and picture quality is not high in many recordings. These elements mean that viewing recordings, while having the effect of allowing a sense of the production, does not replicate the experience of viewing the performance live.

The access to recordings of the plays was of particular use to this study. I watched the original Broadway production of *Angels* and the original production of *Rent*. In addition to these I was able to watch the recording of *My Night with Reg*, *The Normal Heart* and *Falsettoland*. The viewing of the original productions of both *Angels* and *Rent* allowed for a comparative viewing based on my knowledge of the London production. In addition, having seen both the revivals and a version of the original Broadway *Rent* by this point I was able to consider these alongside the original productions.

From a personal perspective, I viewed these particular recordings in July 2012, approximately midway through my research. Viewing these recordings at this point allowed me to connect with and consider the texts in their performance context. Viewing them at such a pivotal point in my research gave me impetus and inspiration by returning to the heart of this study, the performance of these texts. Viewing the New York productions of these texts also allowed me a clearer awareness of the similarities and differences between these and the London productions versions. Although I cannot claim to have experienced the original productions or cast, the opportunity to view these recordings has nonetheless enhanced my understanding of the text and therefore strengthened my analysis, allowing me to see

17 Rent, recorded at the Nederlander Theatre, 28th March 1996.
20 Finn, William directed by Lapine, James *Falsettoland*, Playwrights Horizons, July 8th 1990.
performances of the texts that I otherwise would not have experienced. The viewing of the other plays listed allowed me to gain an understanding of other AIDS plays in performance.

The use of recordings also does not replace the experience of viewing a live performance; however they can enhance understanding of a text. It is important to remember that the archival record is also, as Steedman describes ‘[M]ade from selected and concisely chosen documentation from the past.’ Meaning that therefore, it is only possible to access in the archive what has been chosen for a particular production, or from what an archivist deems to be worthy of preserving. There is also awareness when using the theatrical archives that this side of the production process was not intended for the audience to use. As Steedman says of archives more generally, ‘[the historian] will always read what was not intended for his or her eyes’ when using archives to write about performance this is particularly important. These ‘backstage’ documents allow an interpretation that is different to that of the ‘average’ theatre experience and must be used carefully, as it has been here, to enhance but not drive understanding of the text. There was also clearly a difference in the availability of archival records in my experience, and the decisions relating to what records are kept may reflect the perceived importance of these texts. As a facet of the analysis here focuses on the transposing from New York to London, so the differing archival records across the two countries inform this.

My experience of the archives indicates that there is still a varied approach to archiving theatrical productions, although in recent years through digitisation this process has become more through. The National Theatre keep substantial records of their productions but even so, it is only in recent years that recoding for posterity has become theatre policy. This was not the case in the period in which Angels was performed. Unlike Broadway theatre, the West End also does not habitually record performances, though again in recent years this is beginning to change. The explanation for this is probably cost-related, that in previous years the cost of recording and storing recordings and materials related to the plays was greater.

Due to the digitisation of both film and other records, we can expect a more detailed archiving process in the future for theatre. As archives outside of the National Theatre (which retains its own materials as records) the other archival records rely on donations. Since theatre is such a collaborative process procuring a full record from all those involved in the process is notoriously problematic. Ultimately archives also rest on what archivists, and donors believe to be worthy of record and therefore unless an entire collection is retained,

like the National Theatre’s or the Larson collection, theatre records are destined to be sporadic. This is illustrated by the fact that the majority of materials related to Rent are, as noted, held in the Larson collection at the Library of Congress. These materials were donated by the Larson family to this archive and therefore the most comprehensive record on Rent now lies outside a theatre archive.

The experience of using the archives greatly enhanced my personal experience and understanding of these and this was particularly true in the case of Angels, as the National’s records are substantial. The archival element to this research adds a dimension outside of the written text of the play. Although a performance is ephemeral, the addition of archival material alongside the written play text allows the performance to be considered in its more rounded form in analysis.

1.2.2 Press response to the plays

That this study also considers the response of critics, and the potential audience response, also positions its contribution as original. Previous work on both of these plays has focused largely on the textual content rather than the reception. The critical response provides an insight into potential reception of the plays. Ideally, to gauge reception quantitative and qualitative audience research would be undertaken to assess a cross section of audience responses to the plays. In looking at these plays retrospectively such analysis is not possible, therefore the press response gives some account of public perceptions. The response of the press is used with the understanding that it is both an informed and biased account.

The critics of the National press are an informed audience; by nature of their profession they are knowledgeable and experienced in the field of theatre and artistic criticism. However their experience cannot mirror an audience’s, not least because each audience member’s experience is different, but also by nature of their professional experience they are set apart from the ‘average’ audience member. In seeing more productions than the ‘average’ audience member and in reflecting upon them critically for a living the critical response is naturally slightly apart from the general audience.

The critical response is therefore treated with some caution: Michael Billington, one of the critics used, has himself stated that critics should not be required to be representative of the audience. He says:
[W]e are not there as audience representatives, or spokespersons. We are there to describe, analyse and evaluate what we see. We may be right or wrong according to taste, but we are individuals expressing an opinion rather than tribunes of the people. Billington here illustrates that the critical opinion is coloured by professional role, and status. A response to the problems with this can be found in Nick Hytner’s reply to Billington’s comment, in which he noted that the ‘first string of critics of all the major daily papers…are male, white, over 50 and Oxbridge educated.’ Hytner here has a point: the critical view is derived from, on the whole, a narrow demographic. Susan Bennett argues that theatre critics, while qualified by their expertise, have little in common with the rest of the theatre going public. However, as indicated in their use across the analysis, these critics do provide a professional insight into the reception of these plays.

The theatre critics, as noted, represent an informed response to performance. The critics used in this study are drawn mainly from the British broadsheet press. That is, the critics employed by the major newspapers. Their writing, both on these plays and beyond, can be useful in gathering a picture of both responses to these texts and of the London theatrical landscape in this period. In addition, two of the main London theatre critics, Michael Billington and Nicholas deJongh, have written books on British theatre and gay theatre respectively. Although not professional academics, Billington and deJongh have a high degree of expertise in this field and their reviews, and extended writing are therefore important sources for this study.

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1.3 Background to the study

The analysis of theatrical texts, performances, and practitioners’ work will be considered within what is termed here the ‘theatrical landscape’. The theatrical landscape considered here is the London theatre scene taking into account the commercial West End, subsidised theatre in the form of The National Theatre, Royal Shakespeare Company, Royal Court and similar venues within the London fringe or ‘Off West End.’ These have been selected as the ‘landscape’ in question primarily because the productions central to this study were situated within this geographical and artistic area. The focus on London here is primarily due to the situating of the productions in question. However, London theatre has long been the centre of British Theatre, and the works chosen for this study reflect this. Therefore while mention may be made of regional productions related to this study, the focus is on the theatrical landscape of London.

Writing about AIDS developed fairly quickly after 1981 as explored in detail in Chapter 2. Much of the writing and criticism of these plays, too, came from those closely affected by AIDS. Those communities affected most by the disease produced cultural responses in the form of activism and education, which are again explored in Chapter 2. This meant that the first critical responses to work on AIDS came from within the communities. This is seen in newspaper and personal biographical accounts - for example, the work of Larry Kramer, one of the first and most prominent AIDS activists, wrote numerous newspaper articles and later his historical biographical account Reports from the Holocaust. Similarly in Britain, Simon Watney produced several works on AIDS, while also being closely involved in activism and Gay politics including being a founding chair of the Terrance Higgins’ trust, Britain’s leading HIV/AIDS charity. Douglas Crimp in his work Cultural Analysis, Cultural Activism presents a collection of essays dealing with the wider

28 There is some question and debate as to the full or appropriate title for the theatre. Officially the name of the theatre company remains the Royal National Theatre. However the theatre has been known, and produces its publicity material with the name ‘The National Theatre’ therefore in keeping with the organisation’s preferred mode of address the term ‘The National Theatre’ will be used here to describe both the building and the organisation.
29 Larry Kramer formed Gay Men’s Health Crisis one of the first activism groups to respond to the AIDS crisis. He hosted the first fundraisers, awareness raising campaigns and orchestrated care for those with AIDS in the early years of the epidemic. Kramer left GMHC after ideological differences and in 1987 was a central figure in forming ACT UP which went on to become the most prominent AIDS activist group.
cultural impact of AIDS, similar to Watney’s British account. Crimp was, like Watney, heavily involved in AIDS activism from early in the AIDS crisis. Crimp’s work, also written early in the epidemic, provides an historical record of both cultural reactions and academic responses to AIDS in performance. Crimp followed this with two more works on AIDS which continue his cultural analysis. Crimp, it is important to note, is also known for his contribution to Postmodernist scholarship, chiefly with his work On the Museum’s Ruins. Crimp’s analysis of AIDS combines his postmodernist approach to analysis with his personal experiences of the AIDS epidemic.

These writers were of the demographic directly affected by AIDS, both gay men who cite their personal experience within their work. Similarly the playwrights of the texts, Kushner and Larson, were both part of communities affected by AIDS. Kushner was a gay man and Larson a young man during the first years of AIDS. Both of them would have witnessed the effects of the AIDS epidemic as it began to impact on their communities. This closeness to the epidemic allows a closeness and understanding that those removed from it could not replicate, however, issues of personal bias must also be considered in this context due to the close relationship, and emotive nature of the subject matter.

The most detailed academic work to deal with the subject of AIDS in performance is David Roman’s Acts of Intervention, which does so from an American perspective. Roman has provided a comprehensive study of AIDS in performance from the earliest performance responses to detailed accounts of the two most commercially successful and well known responses to AIDS in theatre, Angels and Rent. Roman’s chapter ‘November 1, 1992: AIDS/Angels in America’ considers the impact of viewing Angels on the eve of Bill Clinton’s election as president of the United States. Alongside this volume Roman also in his later work Performance in America, dedicates a specific chapter to AIDS in performance. Roman is an academic who specialises in theatre and performances studies. However, as the opening sentence to his book highlights the work ‘[It] is a product of the performance, AIDS and academic communities of which I am a part and which compose my world.’ Roman is invested in both the performance and the community from which the performance is

35 Ibid.
produced. Like Kramer and Watney there is for Roman, a personal connection to the AIDS epidemic that drives their analysis. The only other long and detailed study on AIDS and performance is Kistenberg’s *AIDS Social Change and Theater; Performance as Protest.* These provide the only focused analysis of AIDS in theatrical performance. Two edited collections of AIDS plays represent the rest of this limited picture on performance and AIDS.

Watney followed up his initial work with a more focused analysis of AIDS in the British media, and he is to date the only author to examine political, cultural and sociological response to AIDS in the early years of the epidemic. His study, though valuable, leaves scope for further research to be undertaken. In writing at a time so close to the era he is examining, Watney does not have the ability to reflect on the longer term impact of what he writes about. Also, although his work on popular culture and art is varied, he leaves AIDS drama largely untouched.

There is, as indicated, fairly extensive work relating directly to Kushner’s plays in a more general basis. The 1997 volume, *Approaching the Millennium; Essays on Angels in America* covers a variety of facets of Kushner’s play, including AIDS, national identity, racial issues and religion. Fisher’s *The Theater of Tony Kushner* deals with Kushner’s canon of work and has a chapter focused on *Angels.* A more recent collection by Fisher again deals with the whole body of Kushner’s work, including several chapters on *Angels.* Robert Vorlicky’s collection is called *Tony Kushner in Conversation*, which (as the title suggests) includes interviews with the playwright on a variety of subjects and offers some reflection

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43 Chapter three of *The Theater of Tony Kushner* (p54) is entitled *Troubling the Waters: Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes*, it is sub divided into two sections; *The Angel of History: Millennium Approaches and Living Past Hope: Perestroika*.
from Kushner on his own work in an article named *Thinking About the Longstanding Problems of Virtue and Happiness.*

These collected volumes indicate the extent of academic interest in Kushner’s play. It is of note that few of these essays concern themselves with the performed version of the text. There is one essay directly addressing the British version which does use the performed version to some extent, but is mainly focused on textual content as related to Brechtian aesthetics and Walter Benjamin’s philosophies. This essay, along with one interview that was originally one of the National Theatre’s Platform events, is the only detailed accounts of the London performance. Therefore, while *Angels* has created substantial academic interest, there has to date been no analysis of the plays that takes into detailed consideration specifically the London performance of them.

There has been comparatively little academic analysis of *Rent*, which again positions this thesis as original, particularly given its focus on the London production. Roman dedicates his afterword in *Acts of Intervention to Rent*, in which he discusses the popularity of *Rent* and contemplates the ability of a mass-marketed commodity such as a musical like this to represent people affected by AIDS. Roman acknowledges at the time of his writing that he could not offer a comprehensive reflection on the text, but recognises *Rent* as a milestone in AIDS performance-evolution. *Rent* indicates another step on an ongoing journey in confronting AIDS through performance. Roman’s analysis is one of few academic responses to *Rent*; others comprise a few journal articles, considering aspects of *Rent* from its relation to *La Boheme* (on which it is based) to the depiction of ethnicities in the text.

Though these articles provide insight, no one aside from Roman considers directly the depiction of AIDS in *Rent*. Existing academic analysis of *Rent* as a musical can be found in

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50 The National Theatre Platforms are Q&A sessions held alongside productions designed to give audiences further insight into the production. Several were held for Angels recordings of which may be found at the NT archive. There are two published versions, one by the NT itself in their Platform Papers series, *Platform Papers 2, On Angels in America*, Tony Kushner, Declan Donnellan and Nick Ormerod, NT Press, 1992. The other published version can be found in Mars Jones, Adam, *Tony Kushner at the Royal National Theatre of Great Britain*, in Vorlicky, *Tony Kushner in Conversation*, 1998, p18.
52 Ibid.
several journal articles on topics ranging from fan responses, Larson’s adaptation of Puccini’s opera to queer and ethnic identities in his text. Rent is mentioned in texts relating to the American musical. These include Bruce Kirle’s Unfinished Business Broadway Musicals as Works in Progress, and Elizabeth L Wollman’s work on musical theatre, both mention Rent in the wider context of musical theatre’s development across the 1990s. Rent is also mentioned in works on Gay theatre, including David Roman’s later works. Rent gains passing reference in a variety of texts on Gay theatre and/or Gay identities but as yet no detailed or comprehensive analysis in this area has taken place.

Despite Rent’s being mentioned in a variety of texts, a more sustained analysis in a full length work does not exist. The analysis of Rent focuses on its place in the musical theatre canon, considering the evolution of the rock musical and its position as a contemporary work of musical theatre. In addition, no work to date has considered the London production specifically and the transfer of this musical to the London stage. The untimely death of Rent composer/lyricist Jonathan Larson, on the eve of Rent’s first performance in 1994, however, resulted in a large amount of press attention for both the theatrical text and the author.

It becomes clear that overall there is a lack of focused work on the London productions of these plays outside of reviews. This gives this study a unique approach; to date no analysis has compared the two plays in detail, in their original American setting or otherwise. This comparative approach taken when addressing the question of significance in particular also gives this work an unparalleled position. In addition to the lack of previous work focused on the depiction of AIDS in the specific elements of Angels and Rent the

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55 Nisbet, Ian, Transposition in Jonathan Larson’s Rent, Studies in Musical Theatre, Volume 5 Number 3.
57 Rent is mentioned in passing in most recent surveys of musical theatre, particularly those with an American bias. These include Bruce Kirle’s Unfinished Business Broadway Musicals as Works in Progress, Southern Illinois University Press; 1st edition, October 24, 2005 and Elizabeth L Wollman The Theater Will Rock A History of the Musical From Hair to Hedwig, University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, 2006.
60 David Roman as noted dedicates his final chapter to Rent writing soon after its premiere in Acts of Intervention, Indiana University Press, Indiana, 1998. David Savran’s article Rent’s Due: Multiculturalism and the spectacle of Difference, Journal of American Drama and Theatre 14 (Winter 2002) cited above also is included in his own later work, A Queer Sort of Materialism Recontextualising American Theater, University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, 2003. Rent gains passing reference in a variety of texts on Gay theatre and/or Gay identities but as yet no detailed or comprehensive analysis in this area has taken place.
research approaches, the use of archival material and my personal perspective as a researcher give this account a unique perspective.

1.3.1 Queer Theory

Each of the texts is influenced by, and may be considered in relation to queer politics and theory which emerged in the period prior to these plays being written. Queer theory developed following the Feminist Movement demonstrations of the 1960s and 70s. Queer theory is an extension of questioning the nature of gender as part of an ‘essential self’, and the traditional imposed roles and expectations around gender and sexuality. Especially questioning the categorisation and binary divide of male and female. Following the lead of women’s studies and the Feminist Movements of the 60s and 70s, gay people began rethinking their position in society and, as a result, the terms and means of discussing and labelling sexuality. The term 'Queer theory' derived in part from a reclaiming the word ‘queer’ by the gay community which had previously been used as a derogatory term for homosexual people, reflective of the reclaiming of ‘Black’ as a self-descriptor by African American groups. The term ‘queer’ as used in Queer theory refers to people who experience same sex attraction and also those of transgender and non-binary gender identities and a range of people across the LGBT*61 spectrum. As with all ‘labels’ individuals within these categories may choose not to use or identify as ‘queer’, however it has becomes a common and accepted term for the above.

Queer theory further developed out of a response to the AIDS crisis itself, which promoted a renewal of radical activism. This included a drive towards safer sex education, which emphasised sexual practices over sexual identities; and a conflating of activism around the cause of AIDS that brought together previously diverse groups within the LGBT* community, alongside associated affected groups like sex workers. The debates over labels, and the consideration of discourses of power related to sexuality and healthcare as a result of the AIDS epidemic, caused reflection on wider associated issues and terms. This included work by Dian Fuss62 and Thomas Yingling63 as well as Eve Sedgewick’s work on

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61 LGBT is the acronym for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender people. The use of a * following ‘T’ is a recent addition designed to encompass all gender identities. Other variants on this abbreviation include LGBTQ to include ‘queer’ or LGBTQA to include Asexuality.


Eve Sedgwick’s work focuses on making the reader more alert to the ‘Potential queer nuances’ of literature, encouraging the reader to displace their heterosexual identifications in favour of searching out ‘queer idioms.’ Her notion is that ‘the major nodes of thought and knowledge in twentieth-century Western Culture as a whole are structured by a chronic, now endemic crisis of homo/heterosexual definition.’\footnote{Sedgwick, Eve, The Epistemology of the Closet, University of California Press, 1990, p1.} This work is influential in the formation of Queer studies ideas. As Sedgwick further explains:

> Queer can refer to: the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone’s gender or anyone’s sexuality aren’t made (or can’t be made) to signify monolithically.\footnote{Sedgwick, 1990, p3.}

Queer theory therefore expands the scope of its analysis to all kinds of behaviours, including those which are gender-bending as well as those which involve 'queer' non-normative forms of sexuality. This links to queer performance or queering performance in its exploration of behaviours. This consideration of behaviours, gender and sexuality is particularly useful in creating and writing on performance texts.

There is a clear alignment of AIDS as an issue, AIDS activism and AIDS impacting on culture and Queer theory’s development. As Thomas Yingling describes in his account of AIDS in America, ‘the psychic presence of AIDS signifies a collapse of identity and
difference that refuses to be abjected from the systems of self-knowledge. Queer theory and AIDS had become interconnected. This relationship between the real life impact of AIDS and the theoretical platform of Queer theory is a useful facet in this study. Queer theory also draws on postmodernist ideas, particularly those around death of the subject and identity issues, which can be closely related to cultural responses to AIDS. The historical context of AIDS activism and its role in discussing and depicting AIDS through performance will be reflected on throughout this analysis and is considered in more detail in Chapter 2.

Queer performance is at once an extension or actualisation of the theory and of the related theoretical paradigm of performativity. In Judith Butler’s ideas on performativity, the movements and stylised acts of a person constituted ‘gendering’ them but they formed a version of performance. Queer performativity then is not the expression of a social identity, but in fact the identity becomes self reflexively constructed by the performances themselves. While performativity in Butler’s work is used to describe gender interpretation and depiction, when used in conjunction with queer theory it becomes a mode for transforming the way we may define – and challenge - boundaries to identity.

In a practical sense, the application of queer theory to a text can either come through its reading or its production. In both instances this involves interpretation that is different or separate from heterosexual dominance. This may be divided into queering performance and queer performance. The purpose of queer performance is to question or undermine or subvert traditional gender assumptions. The difference from queering performance is that queer performance is not be based entirely on a re-imagining of existing work but on creating work independently. Queer performers or performance are designed to explore the ideas, or deliberately exist, within the paradigm of queer. Such performances respond to the heterosexist bias of the dominant culture as outlined by Sedgewick above, and queer artists offer their own versions of the coming-of-age story, the love story, and stories of loss and mourning. The genre of ‘Queer Performance’ as a separate genre, albeit related to and of influence on the texts considered here, will not be considered directly. In a practical sense the application of queer theory to a text is either through its reading or its production.

Further theoretical consideration is built around the nature of a performance text. This is a text built on matters of social and cultural convention; its significance does not belong to

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74 Ibid.
the individual. Moreover it exists in a world through constant reproduction. In relation to literary or theatrical texts this means that a ‘meaning’ (such as it is) belongs to the reader or audience. This element of analysis draws on, but isn’t exclusively tied to, poststructuralist and postmodernist approaches. Particularly useful to this analysis are Umberto Eco’s ideas around art and undefined meaning, as explored in The Open Work, 75 and the relation of language and art. In later work Eco goes on to explore this use of language more closely within semiotic theory. 76 This analysis of language, and opening of its use and meanings, is particularly useful in considering performance and re-interpretations of the playwrights’ written word in performance, and later in considering revived versions of the text. When considering performance and the multiple versions of one play, and indeed the multiple meanings generated by an audience, the idea of an undefined and fluid meaning of art is significant.

Richard Schechner, in his work on performance theory, highlights the relationship between post structuralism and performance studies, noting that:

Post-structuralism has helped expand the range of what is considered "performance," including but far surpassing the "performing arts." Performance, and its sister, the performative, now is seen to inhabit just about all aspects of human thought, expression, and behavior. 77 Schechner here highlights the link between poststructuralist characteristics and performance - the spectrum of instability - encapsulating a range of behaviours and expressions within poststructuralist thinking which can be seen to have an affinity with performance studies. The postmodernist sceptical approach and the emphasis on personal interpretation and construction fits well with performance and performance studies. However, Schechner in the article above expresses caution that post structuralism is not an exact fit for performance studies. 78 Even so, these ideas, and indeed Kushner and Larson’s texts fit with these wider philosophical approaches.

The nature of performance works with the use of poststructuralist and postmodernist approaches. In addition performance studies scholars have drawn on these ideas in

76 Eco’s later work includes; A Theory of Semiotics (1975), The Role of the Reader (1979) and Semiotics and Philosophy of Language (1984).
77 Schechner, Richard, TDR Comment: Post Post-Structuralism, TDR, TDR: The Drama Review Volume 44, Number 3 (T 167), Fall 2000, pp. 4-7.
78 Schechner, Richard, TDR Comment: Post Post-Structuralism, TDR, TDR: The Drama Review Volume 44, Number 3 (T 167), Fall 2000, pp. 4-7.
developing theories around performance. Marvin Carlson points to ‘local semiosis’. In writing about the role of the audience in semiotic theory, he points to a specific arrangement of signs within a performance that is unrepeatable. The subtle or striking change from performance to performance or in the re-mounting of any drama text in another time or circumstance is an approach that will be integral in this analysis, in considering the plays in their performance context and potential impact of these performances. In keeping with this, Susan Bennett refers to the ‘social contract’ of the contemporary audience in that they agree to be passive in behaviour but open minded and ready to interpret what they see. She calls this the ‘emancipation’ of the audience. A consideration of the role of the audience through Bennett’s work and the theories she uses - including, as with Carlson, a poststructuralist response to theatre - can also be applied to these texts.

Theatre and performance theory, as highlighted in Carlson and Bennett above, often draws on existing theoretical frameworks. Theorising in theatre is a relatively new approach; therefore those writing on performance must adapt existing theories. However, these theories, often designed for literary criticism, rarely fit the analysis of performance precisely. In discussing theatrical texts and productions the work under analysis is by definition the work of multiple authors and disciplines. It is also received by multiple audiences and is different every night; there is no finite or definitive text to draw on. In relation to performance analysis, therefore, bespoke theoretical frameworks are less common. Key cornerstones of performance theory may be found in Victor Turner and Richard Schechner who bridged a gap between sociology and theatre performance with their respective studies. Turner and Schechner’s works are specifically designed for performance. This makes their work significant in any analysis of performance text which focuses on the performed rather than written version of that text. It is therefore of use in this thesis for considering how audiences in Britain may have responded to Angels and to Rent. Schechner, Carlson and Bennett are three examples of authors who drew on a variety of other approaches and disciplines. By its nature, theatre is difficult to theorise from a singular point of view: with so many artistic influences working simultaneously, and the infinite spectrum of audiences’ responses, theatre is best served by a variety of and often adapted theoretical approaches. This will be combined

with direct performance and drama related theoretical approaches, such as that begun by Schechner and his counterparts.

1.3.2 Definition of key terms

It is important to define and clarify key terms used in the study in relation to both the medical and performance aspects. Terminology surrounding HIV and AIDS has developed and altered drastically over the course of the last twenty years, which serves to illustrate the fluid nature of definitions surrounding AIDS. Performance terminology must be clearly defined to avoid confusion.

HIV and AIDS were not the initial terms used by medical professionals. In America, at various times, AIDS was referred to as gay cancer, Gay-Related Immune Deficiency or GRID. These terms were seen in both the medical and popular press. The name Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome and its acronym AIDS came into use in 1982. It was considered an appropriate name because people acquired the condition rather than inherited it and because it was a syndrome, with a number of manifestations, rather than a single disease.

HIV stands for Human Immunodeficiency Virus and was discovered to be the virus that causes AIDS in 1984. HIV infects and gradually destroys an infected person's immune system, reducing their protection against infection and cancers. AIDS meanwhile is classified via a person's CD4 and T-cell count or by a number of 'indicator' diseases or conditions. Having one or more of a list of AIDS-defining conditions including Lymphoma, Salmonella and toxoplasmosis of the brain are indicative of AIDS. For the purposes of this analysis 'AIDS' will be used as the umbrella term for discussing the medical condition. This is the recommended terminology from UN/AIDS, a leading organisation in AIDS research and treatment. As their guidelines state, the term HIV/AIDS is to be avoided because 'it can cause confusion. Most people with HIV do not have AIDS.'

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82 Key terms are listed at the front of this manuscript. Appendix 1 features a more detailed history of HIV/AIDS.
86 Below 200 cells or a CD4+ T-cell percentage of total lymphocytes of less than 15% (CDC). CDC, 1993.
87 Having one or more of a list of AIDS defining conditions including Lymphoma, Salmonella and toxoplasmosis of the brain indicates a person has AIDS, CDC, 1993.
88 UN/AIDS is an established organisation for the furthering of research and treatment for people with AIDS as a branch of the UN. Full details and history are available on their website here: <www.unaids.org> Accessed March 2014.
89 UNAIDS, Terminology Guidelines, October 2011. Available at: <www.unaids.org> Accessed, 30th December
worldwide impact, the phrase ‘AIDS epidemic’ will be used. Again, this is the preferred term of UN/AIDS guidelines: the word ‘pandemic’, which is often used interchangeably with ‘epidemic’ in relation to AIDS, is viewed as imprecise and inappropriate. In chapter two there is a more detailed reflection on the history of AIDS.

In discussing sexual orientation and sexual identity the term ‘gay’ will most often be employed. This term is used to denote the specific demographic group involved in much of the discussion. It is recognised that the labelling or self-identification of sexuality and gender are personal and ever evolving terms. The relevant abbreviations and definitions change continually and are relative to personal and social context. The term ‘gay’ can refer to same-sex sexual attraction, same-sex sexual behaviour, and same-sex cultural identity. The plays deal directly with the demographic group of ‘gay men.’ The term ‘gay’ is the preferred term of the playwrights, in keeping with their era for issues of clarity when referencing the play the term ‘gay’ will be used throughout.

The terms used in relation to performance are also significant. Performance in this context is used to denote the physical action and live moment. To clarify: ‘performance’ or ‘performance text’ is used to denote the piece of work as written/directeddesigned across an entire run of a particular production. Performance, meanwhile, is used to denote a particular performance at a particular point in time. It will be specified throughout whether the live performance or the written text is being referred to. At times these are indistinguishable, such as when quoting directly a line of dialogue or song. To show which is being discussed, the director(s) of the piece will be referenced for live performances, and the playwright will be noted when considering the written text. The source of any information throughout this analysis - for example archival material, personal viewing of the play or the play text - will also be clearly referenced throughout where appropriate.

The term ‘AIDS play’ is used to denote plays that place AIDS as a central focus or issue within their action. This term is potentially problematic, as with any genre classification, because many plays will have multiple plots, themes and issues contained within them. Likewise, genre categorisation is highly subjective: for one viewer a play could be classified as a ‘romance’ and for another a ‘comedy’, therefore classification will always cause dispute. One person’s ‘AIDS play’ is another person’s ‘contemporary political drama’ or ‘social drama.’ In the case of the specific term 'AIDS play' there are also grounds for, as
with the term ‘gay play’, an accusation of a reductive element. To define a play as either ‘gay’ or ‘AIDS’ is perhaps to detract from the fact that it is a play about, for example, a romance that happens to be gay, or about dealing with illness that happens in this instance to be AIDS. However, although it is important to keep this in mind, the term is an accepted and used descriptor of the texts in question.

The term ‘AIDS play’ has no single specific origin but seems to have been adopted fairly quickly to describe the performance related responses of the early epidemic. It is used by Michael Fengold in the introduction to Elizabeth M Osborn's 1990 anthology of AIDS plays, *The Way We Live Now*. It is again used in Therese Jones’ anthology of AIDS plays. Jones refers, retrospectively, initially to a ‘theatre of AIDS’ in relation to the earliest of texts, but when speaking of Hoffman’s *As Is* and Kramer’s *The Normal Heart*, Jones uses the term ‘AIDS plays’. The term is used across other works previously mentioned, such as Roman and Watney’s analyses, as well as being found in the popular press used as part of this study. This indicates that the term ‘AIDS Play’ is an established and accepted descriptor for plays that hold AIDS as a central theme. Here, the term is also used to describe any play that holds AIDS as a central theme or focus. It is recognised that all of these plays deal with elements beyond AIDS and are artistic works in their own right beyond the chosen subject matter.

### 1.3.3 Parameters of the study

As explained earlier, the analysis will focus on two American plays which address AIDS in performance on a British stage. These plays have been chosen for their prominence both as pieces of theatre in their own right and as works on AIDS. The decision to consider just two examples allows for an in-depth study of these works and their differing approach to depicting AIDS. While a wider selection of texts would create a broader picture of depictions of AIDS in London theatre, the focus on these two texts as a case study, allows for closer examination. In considering the two texts, which vary differently in their approach creates a detailed study of how these plays depicted AIDS on stage. The importance of the many other

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91 Jones, Therese *Sharing the Delirium; Second generation AIDS plays and performances*, Heinemann, London, 1994, pix.

92 Jones, 1994, p xii.

93 A list of plays deemed to fall into the category ‘AIDS Play’ are found in Appendix 2, a list of films that fall under the category ‘AIDS Films’ can be found in Appendix 3.
theatrical works on AIDS are recognised as significant; however, in order to examine in depth the impact of transferring these New York productions to the London stage a more focused approach was needed and therefore only two texts were considered. By considering these two very different texts - a play at the National Theatre and a West End musical - a spectrum of performance and AIDS theatre may be gained. The use of imported American, and specifically New York originated work, to the London theatrical landscape allows for a further exploration of the depiction of AIDS as transposed to London.

British plays dealing with AIDS are not examined in detail. Although they contribute to the depiction of AIDS in theatre, for the purposes of brevity and focus the case study of these two plays remains the focus. It is recognised nonetheless that British plays are of vital importance in depicting AIDS on stage. Kevin Elyot’s *My Night With Reg* was among the first plays to deal with AIDS seen on the British stage, and was written by a British playwright. This play was very successful, transferring from its original production at London’s Royal Court theatre, to the West End. This indicated that the comedy, centring on a group of gay men in London, had a strong commercial appeal. I would argue that Elyot’s play is the most important British work on AIDS in theatre to date. For clarity and focus however, Elyot’s work, along with later plays that included AIDS in their subject matter such as Mark Ravenhill’s *Some Explicit Polaroids* are not considered. While these plays, and other British-originated performances, are significant in the depiction of AIDS on stage. The texts chosen have been used as a case study for their prominence as AIDS texts, and as examples of American imported work to the London theatrical landscape.

The theatres in which they were staged also supports this rationale of a more focused selection. One is staged at the National Theatre while the other was in the high profile, commercial West End. These two types of theatre are significant as they represent two different strands of performance in London. The National Theatre is a subsidised theatre, charged with providing theatre that is culturally representative and appropriate for Britain but also given a degree of artistic freedom for daring new works. In contrast, the commercial West End, specifically the genre of musicals, is driven by financial gain and governed by public demand. The importance of the many other theatrical works on AIDS are recognised as significant; however, in order to examine in depth the impact of transferring these

American works to the British stage a more focused approach was needed and therefore only two texts were considered.

Also excluded from this study is the genre of work known as ‘Live Arts’ or ‘Performance Art’. Live Arts is used to describe acts of performance undertaken by a visual artist or a group of artists. Live Art is discrete from the world of theatrical performance, but not altogether separate from it its intent and alignment with the visual arts. It is an innovative and exploratory approach to contemporary performance practices. Live Art can also be referred to as time-based art, as the exploration of temporality tends to be a key theme of this sort of work. Live Art ‘defies precise or easy definition beyond the simple definition that it is live art by artists’ \( ^96 \) by its very nature. The leading proponent of Live arts in Britain says: ‘Live Art should not be understood as a description of an art form but as a strategy to include a diversity of practices and artists that might otherwise find themselves excluded from all kinds of policy and provision and all kinds of curatorial contexts and critical debates.’ \( ^97 \) It is in part this defiance of categorisation which excludes Live Art from this study.

The justification for this exclusion is twofold. Firstly, because the study would not be dedicated solely to the analysis of Live Arts and AIDS, the collected data and analysis created would be too limited to form any full consideration of issues relating to the subject. Secondly, the mode of analysis, terminology and theoretical paradigms for the analysis of Live Art, while interrelated to that of performance in the context used here, are also bespoke and particular to the field. It is therefore unrealistic to bring together an analysis of Live Art and AIDS in any detailed and meaningful manner alongside the analysis of performance proposed here.

It is recognised that looking at theatre in these types of venues represents only one element of the wide spectrum of British theatre. These chosen theatres, and types of play represent what may be considered a brand of middle brow, safe commercial theatre. Though pushing boundaries in their own ways, these plays represent traditional theatrical forms in the stage play and musical theatre. Again while both push the boundaries of their genre in different way, and through theatrical form, they reside within popular and traditional theatre. It is recognised that there is a wide spectrum of theatre and performance between the highly traditional drama of perhaps Shakespeare or traditional British dramatists such as Alan Ayckbourn towards more experimental drama of writers like Caryl Churchill or Sarah Kane.

\(^{97}\) Live Art Development Agency, <www.thisisliveart.co.uk> accessed 14th January 2012.
At the other end of the performance spectrum is Live Art, which as noted is omitted from this study. It is also important to note that a wide range of performance falls between the traditional drama and the category of performance or Live Art. British theatre has undergone substantial changes and radicalisation, in particular since the repeal of censorship. The last 25 years in particular have seen a development in style and form in British theatre.

The London theatrical landscape is a wide and varied one and to this end, the term as explained above is fitting for describing the wider theatre and performance in London or elsewhere. Theatre ranges from small scale plays performed in pub theatres, to large scale productions in the ‘traditional’ performance spaces. In between this there is a wide range of Fringe and Off-West end venues and performance that continues to proliferate and strengthen. The development and popularity of non-traditional theatre companies, such as Punchdrunk, who offer large scale immersive theatre, are finding themselves more and more within ‘mainstream’ theatre. To continue the example of Punchdrunk, the company went from a small scale fringe company to one that works in partnership with the National Theatre. This kind of merging a formally fringe and highly experimental theatre company with the National theatre is indicative of the blurring of lines between the ‘experimental’ and ‘mainstream’ theatre. British theatre, particularly in the diverse London theatrical landscape, is a rich and varied spectrum of performance. Likewise, the theatrical landscape of New York, from which these plays were transposed, is equally broad and varied. It is recognised the plays selected for this case study represent only a small section of the theatrical landscape, however the broader landscape into which they are transposed is taken into consideration when reflecting on these texts.

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98 Punchdrunk has worked with the National Theatre on their productions *Faust* (2006) and *The Drowned Man* (2013) both large scale immersive pieces they were supported by and produced in partnership with the National Theatre.
1.4 Outline of the study

Beginning with *Angels* and followed by *Rent*, these two plays, and the performance of them, will be studied in relation to their depictions of AIDS and the reception they received in Britain by audiences and critics. These are considered broadly under their depiction of characters with AIDS, physical depiction of AIDS, emotional effects of AIDS within the plays and the political implications of AIDS raised by the plays. This reflection on different aspects of the depiction of AIDS within the texts allows for a rounded analysis. Centred on the performance of these texts, the broader categories listed allow for a focused analysis on the various approaches to AIDS each text takes.

Each will be considered in the context of the theatrical landscape, with particular reference to the role and status of the National Theatre and the musical theatre trends within London of the time. After this, the revived versions of each of the plays in 2007 will be reflected on. Again, the depiction of AIDS within the context of 2007, and within a different production, will be considered. This will be followed with an evaluation of the plays’ reception in revival; and their place in the more recent theatrical landscape will be contemplated. While it is not possible to arrive at conclusions around the sustained impact of each of these plays on either audience or the theatrical landscape, it can be considered how each fits within the broader context. By way of conclusion, the reception and significance of both texts will be considered. They will considered in terms of their depiction of AIDS and associated themes, their stylistic impact on the theatrical landscape of London, and the relevance of these texts having been imported from America. To foreground this, Chapter 2 will consider the historical context of both the AIDS epidemic in Britain and the theatrical landscape into which these plays were transposed.
Chapter 2 Social and historical context of AIDS theatre

This chapter will provide an outline to the background and context; it will provide a brief history of the AIDS epidemic and an overview of early cultural responses. This will provide context for and understanding of the situation to which Kushner and Larson responded with their works.\(^9^9\) The plays will be considered in relation to both the AIDS epidemic and the theatrical landscape in which the plays were situated.

2.1 AIDS history\(^1^0^0\)

In America, the first reports of AIDS came from a New York Times article in 1981 which ran the headline ‘Rare Cancer Seen in 41 Homosexuals.’\(^1^0^1\) By 1982 in America, 452 cases in 23 States had been reported to the Centres for Disease Control (CDC).\(^1^0^2\) At this time, there was little understanding of what was causing increasing incidences of immune deficiency and resulting illnesses. Answers did not emerge until 1984, when Dr. Robert Gallo announced the discovery of the virus that causes AIDS.\(^1^0^3\) It was another two years until the virus was known by its current name: HIV. It became clear the condition was not exclusive to homosexuals and a shift in public perception began as early as 1982, as one representative for the CDC noted:

> When it began turning up in children and transfusion recipients that was a turning point in terms of public perception. Up until then it was entirely a gay epidemic, and it was easy for the average person to say 'So what?' Now everyone could relate.\(^1^0^4\)

The late 1970s and early 1980s therefore were marked by fear and uncertainty around AIDS. When, as the CDC quotation above indicates, it began to be seen across the wider population, AIDS moved into public consciousness in America. However, knowledge of the condition was still limited. Gay advocacy groups became frustrated at what they perceived as the slow responses of the government. A lack of research created frustrations; as did problems associated with access to treatment as well as a perceived lack of awareness. That President

\(^9^9\) A list of Kushner and Larson’s respective other works are found in Appendices 5 and 7.  
\(^1^0^0\) Appendix 1 provides a detailed timeline of AIDS history.  
\(^1^0^2\) CDC (1982) ‘Kaposi’s Sarcoma (KS), Pneumocystis Carinii Pneumonia (PCP), and Other Opportunistic Infections (01): Cases Reported to CDC as of July 8.  
\(^1^0^3\) See Appendix 1 for a timeline of AIDS.  
Ronald Reagan did not mention AIDS in an official capacity until 1985, and then only did so in response to reporters’ questions, fuelled anger. This lack of engagement from government agencies to combat AIDS led to the early years of activism, which sought to compensate for government inaction while also assisting with care for those affected by AIDS.

In 1982, Gay Men’s Health Crisis was officially formed in New York. Writer Larry Kramer gathered a group of friends to raise public awareness and to lobby health organisations and government officials for funding, research and awareness of AIDS. One of their first efforts was a fundraising event in 1981, in which Kramer brought a small group of people to his home, that later developed into the formal organisation Gay Men’s Health Crisis. Over time this movement grew across a grassroots network and by 1985 was an active campaign group and provided a network of volunteers to help care for those diagnosed with AIDS. In 1983, Kramer would part company with Gay Men’s Health Crisis to form the more militant ACT UP. Both organisations continued to campaign. Larry Kramer and fellow activist and writer Randy Shilts, in their respective works, articulate in detail the frustrations experienced by the gay community, along with other people diagnosed with AIDS in the early years. Kramer’s and Shilts’ works provide invaluable insight into the early years of the AIDS epidemic and activism. However, they are limited in scope, since chronologically they only detail the very early part of the AIDS epidemic.

Deborah Gould provides an analysis of the rise and decline of the American AIDS activism movement. Gould seeks to explain the impact and decline of ACT UP from multiple locations and perspectives; she charts the work and impact of several groups or ‘chapters’ as they are known. In a somewhat psychological analysis of ACT UP, Gould examines the impact of the death of large numbers of its members dying from AIDS and the loss of morale.

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105 Reagan mentioned AIDS in relation to reporters’ questions on 17th September 1985, as documented by Associated Press Los Angeles. Further information on Reagan’s commentary on AIDS is found in the ACT UP records both online <www.actupny.org/reports/reagan.html> and in the historical records housed at the New York Public Library.

106 ACT UP’s full manifesto and history may be found on their website <www.actupny.org>.

107 Randy Shilts was a journalist whose work on AIDS brought his work to the national press. He went on to write ‘And the Band Played on’; a journalistic book about the beginnings of the AIDS crisis. It was later made into a film.


this created.\textsuperscript{110} Gould’s historical account of ACT UP is comprehensive and reflective, helped by her own involvement in ACT UP, as she outlines in the introduction to the book.\textsuperscript{111} Gould also uses extensive archival material and historical analysis to construct a detailed history of ACT UP; the most detailed analysis to date. Other accounts to deal with ACT UP have done so under the wider umbrella of American protest movements or in relation to AIDS more widely.\textsuperscript{112}

Performance aspects were an integral part of the response to AIDS, as described by Roman.\textsuperscript{113} He states that ‘the social ritual of gathering people into a space of performance to raise money, were, along with memorial services, the first acts of intervention in the fight against AIDS.’\textsuperscript{114} The vigils and fundraising events of early AIDS activism had elements of performance at the centre of their activities. Many used performance as the event, for example through Cabaret fundraisers, or incorporated an element of performance into protests. Roman goes on to credit ACT UP with opening up the fundraising and associated performance beyond the small core group of original activists and fundraisers.\textsuperscript{115}

Performance was therefore integrated into fundraising from the start, and remained an integral part of the AIDS protest movement in America. Drawing on the tradition and format of protest movements of the 1960s, ‘Die ins’ were organised. These were reminiscent of the ‘Sit ins’ of the 1960s, but participants in the rally would obstruct the business or street, rather than simply ‘sitting in’. In addition, ‘Political Funerals’ were held, which turned the memorial services of people with AIDS into a political protest. Activist David Wojnarowicz described them thus:

To turn our private grief for the loss of friends, family, lovers and strangers into something public would serve as another powerful dismantling tool. It would dispel the notion that this virus has a sexual orientation or a moral code. It would nullify the belief

\textsuperscript{110} Gould, D. B, 2009, p 421.
\textsuperscript{111} Gould was a member of the Chicago chapter of ACT UP and began her research into ACT UP’s history after its final meeting was held in 1996; as she explains in her introduction.
\textsuperscript{112} Specific works of this kind to deal with ACT UP specifically under the wider spectrum of protest movements are Shepard, Benjamin and Hayduck, Ronald From ACT UP to WTO urban protest and community building in the era of globalisation, Verson, New Left Books, 2002. And Powers, Roger S, Protests Power and Change An Encyclopaedia of nonviolent action from ACT UP to Women’s Suffrage, Garland Publishing, New York, 1997.
\textsuperscript{114} Ibid.
that the government and medical community has not done very much to ease the spread or advancement of this disease.\(^{116}\)

Wojnarowicz speaks here of the powerful awareness-raising power that events like political funerals, and the other more performative elements of protest, could have. Wojnarowicz’s own funeral took place in New York on 29\textsuperscript{th} July 1992. The funeral procession was led with a banner proclaiming: ‘David Wojnarowicz 1954-1992 Died of AIDS due to government negligence’\(^{117}\). As seen in Wojnarowicz’s own funeral, political funerals combined traditional memorial processions with political protest. With processions of mourners with banners and other effigies of the deceased, the memorial to a friend or relative became in part political protest. Wojnarowicz was an artist and activist in life so it seems logical he would continue this in death; wishing his death to take on political and artistic meaning. ACT UP’s work continues today - still with a performance element to it - details of which are documented on their current website. The online information includes images showing some of the performance-based elements of recent demonstrations.\(^{118}\)

By 1986, there was some progress in America to addressing the issue of AIDS. President Reagan had finally acknowledged AIDS in an official public address.\(^{119}\) The first anti-discrimination case in relation to AIDS was won,\(^{120}\) and the first major treatment progression since the virus was identified was made with the trial of AZT.\(^{121}\) The trial of AZT also marked progress in the social and ethical treatment of people with AIDS, as the clinical trial was stopped early when it was agreed to be unethical to give placebos to people with AIDS.\(^{122}\)

These events form the backdrop of Kushner’s setting for Angels, set in 1985, and the background against which Larson began writing Rent, which was set a few years later in

\(^{116}\) ACT UP David Wojnarowicz political funeral record found at <www.actupny.org/diva/polfunsyn.html> accessed 30\textsuperscript{th} October 2013.  
\(^{118}\) The website which details the recent and upcoming work of ACT UP can be found at <actupny.com/actions> accessed 20\textsuperscript{th} October 2013.  
\(^{119}\) On September 17, President Ronald Reagan mentions AIDS publicly for the first time, vowing in a letter to Congress to make AIDS a priority. http://aids.gov/hiv-aids-basics/hiv-aids-101/aids-timeline/  
\(^{120}\) Pear, R. (1986, 9th August) 'U.S. files first AIDS discrimination charge', the New York Times  
\(^{121}\) As detailed in Avert’s timeline <www.AVERT.org/timeline of AIDS> Full details on the drug itself may be found via their website <www.avert.org/aids-drugs-table.htm>  
1989. There was then slow but steadier progress in AIDS research and treatment in America. ACT UP and other campaign groups like Gay Men’s Health Crisis maintained a high profile; attempting to combat discrimination in healthcare against those with AIDS and the accompanying homophobia. In 1992, when Angels was first staged in America, the election of Democrat President Bill Clinton seemed to signal hope for a new age, as detailed in David Roman’s account of seeing Angels on the eve of Clinton's election.\textsuperscript{123} Despite some progress, however, by 1994, when part two of Kushner’s play opened and Rent began workshop productions, AIDS was the leading cause of death for 25-44 year olds.\textsuperscript{124}

2.1.1 AIDS in Britain

In Britain the first reported case of AIDS was documented in 1981.\textsuperscript{125} By 1983 the first major media scare associated with AIDS occurred, with the headline: 'Hospitals using killer blood.'\textsuperscript{126} This began a spiral of media coverage, including the first labelling of AIDS as a ‘Gay plague’ by the British press.\textsuperscript{127} This kind of media response, filled with fear and elements of homophobia, was mirrored by the first Government information campaign about AIDS which began in 1986. This featured film and print adverts alongside a leaflet delivered to every household.\textsuperscript{128} The campaign cost a total of £20 million with £5 million earmarked for a series of television and cinema adverts featuring what the British Film Institute describes as ‘nightmarish imagery’ of tombstones and icebergs, accompanied by John Hurt’s ‘chilling commentary.’\textsuperscript{129} The tone was such that, when accompanied by the homophobic overtones of articles such as the one above, the adverts compelled ‘ordinary people’ to fear AIDS as a threat from outside, with phrases like ‘so far it’s been confined to small groups’\textsuperscript{130} and urging people ‘don’t die of ignorance’. Implicitly, and combined with a culture of homophobic fear developing around AIDS, these adverts posited as a threat from ‘outside’ or ‘other groups’ to the ‘ordinary’ people of Britain.

\textsuperscript{123} Roman’s chapter November 1 1992 in Acts of Intervention; Performance, Gay Culture and AIDS, Indiana University Press, 1998 (p202) he details experience of witnessing Kushner’s play.
\textsuperscript{124} Source: <www.Avert.org> accessed 4\textsuperscript{th} January 2014.
\textsuperscript{125} Dubois, R.M., Braithwaite, M.A., Mikhail, J.R. et al., (1981) ‘Primary Pneumocystis Carinii and Cytomegalovirus Infections’, The Lancet, ii, 1339
\textsuperscript{126} Mail on Sunday 1983, May 1
\textsuperscript{128} AVERT
\textsuperscript{129} AIDS Don’t Die of Ignorance Campaign British Film Institute, <www.bfi.org> accessed, 31\textsuperscript{st} January 2012.
\textsuperscript{130}Ibid.
AIDS activism in Britain was very different to that in America: in Britain there was a less militant approach to protest and fewer performance led responses. Charities, such as the Terrance Higgins Trust (THT) set up in 1982, were created to help people affected by HIV and AIDS, rather than to focus on political and medical advocacy. Other charities included the London Lighthouse Trust, brought to public attention when Lady Diana Princess of Wales opened it in 1989. In addition to specifically AIDS-related charities, the UK branch of AVERT and organisations such as Stonewall and the London Lesbian and Gay Switchboard have since the 1980s played a part both in caring for those living with HIV and in awareness raising. The emphasis in Britain, however, was on care for those affected, rather than militant or political action. The existence of a National Health Service in Britain meant that the fight for treatment was not the same as in America, where treatment was not accessible to all or affordable to all. While there was still a wait for effective treatments to be developed, in Britain there was not the same sense of there being only treatment for a privileged few, as the NHS (National Health Service) in principle makes treatment available to all. The British government was also seen to be taking action in relation to AIDS. From awareness campaigns to funding NHS treatment and research, Margaret Thatcher’s government - despite a negative attitude towards homosexuality - treated the AIDS epidemic as a medical rather than moral crisis. As such, British AIDS charities were able to focus on care rather than campaigning. This gave the movement a different outlook and approach to that taken in America.

This is not to say that all was well for gay men in Britain; and those campaigning for gay rights in the wider spectrum also adopted AIDS as a cause. British gay advocacy group Stonewall was at the time focused on a variety of issues as well as AIDS. One of their primary focuses was fighting Section 28, which prohibited ‘promotion’ of homosexuality in schools. Section 28, which came into force a year after the government AIDS awareness campaign, was also - paradoxically, given the prominent government AIDS awareness campaign - a barrier to AIDS education. The silencing of any discussion of homosexuality in schools meant that AIDS awareness in sex education was severely hampered.

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132 The NHS makes treatment free and accessible to all in Britain. While it is noted that there is an element of ‘postcode lottery’ involved in this and also noted that some people in Britain can afford, and choose, private health care, in principle there is access to care for all.
133 Stonewall was established in 1989 to oppose section 28; since then it has developed into the leading political advocacy group for lesbian, gay and bisexual people in Britain. <www.stonewall.org.uk> accessed 14th January 2014.
The first group of ‘celebrity’ AIDS related deaths in Britain began with the death of Freddie Mercury in 1991. Mercury, who announced he had AIDS the day before his death, began an era of greater public awareness of the condition. With people like Mercury in the UK, and the news of Rock Hudson’s death several years earlier, AIDS was becoming a greater part of public consciousness. These high profile cases and subsequent awareness campaigns about AIDS happened alongside advances in AIDS treatment in Britain; the advent of new drugs by 1997, including combination therapies of Highly Active Antiretroviral Therapy (known as ART), transformed the lives of many people living with HIV.\textsuperscript{134} By 1997, deaths among people living with HIV fell dramatically following the wider introduction of ART.\textsuperscript{135} In terms of prevention, the UK Government in 1999 announced plans to offer all pregnant women an HIV test as part of routine screening. The government also provided £42 million in compensation to haemophiliacs infected with HIV, and their dependants.\textsuperscript{136}

It is important, in the analysis of these plays, to consider the British experience of AIDS. The difference in the medical, cultural and political experience of AIDS in Britain and America, is not considered here in relation to the audiences’ reception or interpretation. As with the question of audience reception overall, it is recognised that audience perception, or reception in relation to this difference, cannot be quantified. Instead, such issues are a question of property of the text, and relate to the decisions of the writer and creative teams. This means that it is the assumption of the creative teams that either an audience does not require information beyond that in the play in relation to the medical, or that the relevant information is provided within the play. It is still important however, in the analysis of these plays, to consider the British experience of AIDS. This context allows for understanding of the property of the text, and assumptions made by the producers, and therefore informs the transposing of these plays to the British theatrical landscape.

\textsuperscript{134} AVERT Timeline, <www.AVERT.org/timeline> accessed 3\textsuperscript{rd} March 2013.
\textsuperscript{135} Ibid.
2.1.2 Film and television

The American film *Philadelphia* (1994)\(^ {137}\) remains the television and film industry’s most high profile cultural response which deals with AIDS. In the film, which stars Tom Hanks and Denzel Washington, Hanks plays a man with AIDS who fights against his unfair dismissal because of his AIDS diagnosis. Although a watershed film in terms of putting AIDS at the centre of a mainstream Hollywood film, *Philadelphia* is a conservative film. Despite placing a gay character with AIDS at the centre of the narrative, *Philadelphia* has come under much criticism for its portrayal both of people with AIDS and gay characters: the gay men are underdeveloped as characters, and the people with AIDS are all doomed to live short lives filled with suffering. Overall, *Philadelphia* was a politically and socially conservative film despite the themes of justice inherent in its plot. Although it was initially considered a watershed in portrayals both of people with AIDS and of gay characters, it became apparent that *Philadelphia* had not greatly altered the attitude of Hollywood to gay characters, nor had it opened a discussion through film of issues relating to AIDS. While British films such as *Peter’s Friends*\(^ {138}\) and the adaptation of Kevin Elyot’s play *My Night with Reg*\(^ {139}\) did address the issue of AIDS, they didn’t receive the same media attention as *Philadelphia*.

The representations in television and film played a consistent and significant role in cultural representations of AIDS. In Britain, AIDS storylines were taken up by soap operas such as *Eastenders* (BBC, 1985) and *Hollyoaks* (Channel 4, 1995) as well as in medical dramas like *Casualty* (BBC, 1986) and *Holby City* (BBC, 1989). Children’s dramas including *Byker Grove* (BBC, 1989-2006) and *Children's Ward* (BBC, 1995-1998) also included AIDS storylines in the late 1980s and early 1990s. British made-for-television films on the subject included *Intimate Contact* (Central Television, 1987) and *Sweet As You Are* (BBC2, 1988). Both of these films dealt with heterosexual AIDS diagnoses, while *Closing Numbers* (Channel 4, 1993) and *Nervous Energy* (BBC Scotland, 1995), focused on gay people with AIDS.

An in-depth study of AIDS on television is found in *Television AIDS and Risk*, in which the portrayal of AIDS across both television programming and television advertising is examined.\(^ {140}\) These depictions echo the theatrical portrayals of AIDS in their attempts to show

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\(^ {138}\) *Peter’s Friends* written by Rita Rudner and Martin Bergman, 1992.


\(^ {140}\) Tulloch, John and Lupton, Deborah, *Television AIDS And Risk: Cultural studies approach to health*
medical and social issues relating to AIDS. Unlike their American counterparts, such as the film *Philadelphia*, there was little or no political content in such films.

Kylo-Patrick R Hart’s book *The AIDS Movie* explores the depiction of AIDS in film in detail. In the book, Hart outlines an element of silence or moral judgement surrounding AIDS on film. He considers a range of elements related to AIDS representations in cinema; writing about diverse genres; from science fiction; to documentary; to adaptations of AIDS plays. Hart’s study was written in 2000 - long enough after the start of the AIDS epidemic to make it possible to reflect on the impact of these films as well as encompass the key works produced at the height of the epidemic. Hart’s analysis is also fairly wide ranging; looking both at issues of gay identity and considering AIDS within cinematic tradition. Hart concluded by calling for a diversified response to AIDS. He reflects, as AIDS entered its third decade, that the need to reach the diverse groups affected by AIDS with accurate cultural representations was greater than ever. Hart also highlights that representations of AIDS need to be diversified across cultural mediums, including theatre, television and literature. For a full list of AIDS related films see Appendix 3.

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143 In Chapter 4 entitled *Gay men and “The (Primary) Other” in the AIDS Movie*, Hart explores the link between AIDS and gay men, as represented in film; and the relationship gay men have to other social groups in relation to AIDS. In so doing, Hart contextualises the dominant representation of people with AIDS, both within the cinematic representations he considers and in the wider context.
144 Hart’s chapters 1 and 2 deal with a variety of cinematic traditions and conventions as related to AIDS.
145 Hart, 2000, p 98.
146 Ibid.
2.1.3 Literature

The literary response to AIDS is substantial, though early works were relatively niche. These ranged from the photo documentary *Positive Lives response to HIV*\(^{147}\) to short story collection *The Darker Proof*\(^{148}\); both of which functioned as fund raising efforts for AIDS charities. This indicates the varied response, as the two works feature between them: short stories; biographical accounts; and photography journals. Biography and autobiography also played an integral part in the depiction of AIDS in literature. In one of the first books to deal with AIDS through literature, Paul Monette, an American poet, details the author caring for his partner as he dies of AIDS, alongside dealing with his own illness.\(^{149}\)

Two collections deal with the literary response to AIDS: Emmanuel S Nelson’s *AIDS the Literary Response*\(^{150}\) and Judith Laurence Pastore’s edited collection *Confronting AIDS through Literature*\(^{151}\). These two works again consider a spectrum of written responses to AIDS - mainly American in focus - and provide valuable insight into the cultural backdrop of those works on AIDS produced prior to the theatrical texts considered here. These texts deal with responses from early in the epidemic, published as they were in the early 1990s.

The literary response itself was quite extensive, and a detailed list of works, albeit predominantly American, can be found in an annotated bibliography in *Writing AIDS: Gay Literature. Language, and Analysis*\(^{152}\). A further autobiographical work, from a British writer, can be found in Oscar Moore’santhologised newspaper columns detailing his battle with AIDS.\(^{153}\) Rebecca Brown too, in *Gifts of the Body*,\(^{154}\) provides a series of anecdotal accounts of caring for AIDS patients, from the point of view of a home care worker. In fiction, the most famous and critically regarded British literary work to consider AIDS is Alan Hollinghurst’s Booker prize winning *The Line of Beauty*.\(^{155}\) Hollinghurst, however, approaches AIDS as part of the larger tapestry of the era, rather than writing directly about,

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\(^{153}\) Moore, Oscar; *PWA; looking AIDS in the face*, London: Picador, 1996.


AIDS. Similar works from American authors include Dale Peck’s *Fucking Martin*156 and Felice Picano’s *Like People in History*.157 These give more focus directly to AIDS; however, neither work reached the same popular or critical acclaim given to Hollinghurst. This indicates that there was, as in the smaller scale performance, a history of niche works on AIDS being published alongside Hollinghurt’s book, which crossed over into mainstream popular and critical appeal. Across the mediums of film, television and literature there are examples of earlier niche works followed by more successful mainstream texts.

The wider cultural portrayals of AIDS are also considered in more detail in Poirer and Murphy’s book158: an edited collection which considers early AIDS writing across a variety of mediums. It looks at the impact of key examples and approaches, but only considers responses up until 1991. Murphy, in his conclusion to this collection, outlines the importance of writing and other cultural responses to AIDS: ‘In their writings, Monette, and all the others mentioned here, do talk to people with and without AIDS, as long as their writing endures.’159 Murphy here posits the AIDS writing as a personal and cultural historical record of those with AIDS. He goes on to call a ‘failure to testify’ a ‘betrayal’ of those with AIDS.160 In this, Murphy indicates the significance of cultural responses to AIDS. The responses act both as testimony and record of the individual recording them, as well as a wider call for social action.

A recurring theme here is that works and academic critique were produced quickly and in detail, but only covering the earlier years of AIDS. These analyses of literary works, much like Hart’s work on film, are useful in considering the early cultural portrayal of AIDS. The analyses agree that these cultural responses were vital in producing a record and response to AIDS, particularly in the early years of the epidemic - something that is reflected in the theatrical responses. There was, as illustrated, a cultural response to AIDS, seen in television, film and literature; however, it was theatre and performance that provided a response to AIDS both as means of fundraising and awareness-raising. Performance-based responses could be
composed quickly and formed an integral part of the immediate political and social response to the epidemic.\textsuperscript{161}

2.2 AIDS and Theatre

Theatre and performance has been a central part of AIDS activism since the early days of the epidemic. Likewise, the theatre community was so affected by AIDS that artistic responses soon followed the outbreak. From small scale performances used as fundraisers; through live art and performance as protest; through to the larger, more mainstream texts of Angels and Rent; performance has formed part of AIDS history.

2.2.1 AIDS performance history

Performance was an integral part of activism in America, as noted above. In Britain there was not the same level of political activism surrounding AIDS; and in British demonstrations and campaigns, that same performance element was absent. There was, however, a shared use of performance, both for fundraising purposes and for raising awareness. Gay men had connections, both with AIDS and with theatrical communities, which meant that in urban centres, with a high number of gay men, performance was an obvious tool to use to respond to the AIDS crisis. In both Britain and America, this meant that performance as a means to raise money or awareness was a natural progression to using performance as a response to AIDS.

Performance responses began to evolve into full scale productions: Rebecca Ranson’s full length play Warren\textsuperscript{162} in 1986 and Rebecca Headehorn’s One\textsuperscript{163} in 1989 were both early examples. Unusually, both of these early plays were written by women, whereas men would later dominate the area. They sought to illustrate the problems of AIDS as it affected communities, whilst also educating about the stigma of AIDS.\textsuperscript{164} In these early examples, according to David Roman, ‘great art’ was largely forgone in favour of ‘great ritual’ - the emphasis was on appealing to the emotions of the audience and asking them to consider their

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{161} A list of key literary works about AIDS can be found in Appendix 3.
\bibitem{162} Ranson, Rebecca, \textit{Warren}, Staged at 7 Stages Theatre, Atlanta, Georgia, 1984. Cited in Roman, p59.
\bibitem{164} Roman, 1998, p59.
\end{thebibliography}
position in relation to AIDS. Other earlier productions included the poorly received surrealist piece *Night Sweat* by Ron Chesley (1984) and *Fever of an unknown origin* by Stephen Holt (1984). Responses to the epidemic were initially on a small scale; usually performed at specialist theatre companies like Theatre Rhinoceros in San Francisco and, later, at Gay Sweatshop in London. The small scale and informal structure of these productions means that minimal records remain of the texts or their productions. Some play texts do, however, survive from this era; anthologised by Gay Sweatshop: while records of that theatre company itself are held at Royal Holloway’s archives.

The first major work on AIDS seen in theatre was the American play *As Is* (1985) by William Hoffman. This can be seen as the start of the ‘AIDS play’ genre - a play that deals directly with AIDS and its impact on characters within it. As with any broad definition, the term ‘AIDS Play’, as shown in Chapter 1, is potentially broad and problematic. It is questionable whether it should apply only to those plays that take AIDS as a central subject matter, or all of those which reference or include AIDS in some way. In this study the term is taken to mean any play which places AIDS as a key issue or theme. The first play of this kind, *As Is*, follows a group of characters facing AIDS and the implications of that on their lives. This was also the first play dealing with AIDS to gain critical and popular attention: it received the Drama Desk and Obie awards in New York, as well as a Tony nomination. *As Is* can be regarded as the breakthrough production in AIDS related performance because it took AIDS performances from protests, performance art and smaller scale community productions, to full scale theatrical productions that were recognized critically and began to have commercial success.

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166 References to both of these plays can be found in Roman, p44.
167 Theatre Rhinoceros was founded in 1977 in San Francisco. Formed to present Queer theatre, a watershed moment for Theatre Rhinoceros happened in 1984 with the death of founder Allan B. Estes and the staging of ‘The AIDS Show: Artists involved in death and survival’ a work co-authored by 20 San Francisco area artists. It brought national attention to the theatre and was the subject of an Oscar winning PBS documentary the following year. Today it continues as a premiere venue for new Queer writing and maintains an ethos of campaigning for visibility and equality for Queer people. <www.therhino.org> accessed 4th April 2013.
168 Gay Sweatshop, formed in 1975 after the organisation Inter-Action advertised for Gay playwrights to submit for a season known as ‘Homosexual Acts’: the first season of Gay plays staged in Britain. Following the success of this in 1976, a series of plays was staged at the Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA) in London and from here the company staged a variety of works by Gay writers.
169 Gay Sweatshop published a variety of gay plays, either individually or as anthologies. The full catalogue is not listed here, as not being specifically AIDS related are not relevant to this study. Records of their publications can be found in their archive and via the British Library.
170 Gay Sweatshop’s records were donated to Royal Holloway’s archives and form part of their special collections.
The following texts also formed part of the theatrical exchange on AIDS: Paul Rudnick’s *Jeffery* (1996), Steven Dietz’s *Lonely Planet* (1994) and Terrance McNally’s *Love! Valour! Compassion!* (1995). McNally’s text - in which a group of gay men meet over a summer and eventually come to terms with the AIDS diagnosis of one of their group - was well received. McNally’s play was later turned into a film, featuring most of the original cast. McNally, a prolific playwright, previously wrote *Andre’s Mother* - another early AIDS play.\(^{172}\)

The early works on AIDS in theatre were by necessity small scale productions, therefore on the whole prohibitive to musical theatre, which generally requires greater resources. However, *Rent* is not the only musical to deal with AIDS; nor was it the first. Previously there had been the smaller scale *AIDS the Musical*\(^{173}\), followed by *Falsettoland* by William Finn. The latter musical was the winner of two Tony Awards in 1992, and was first produced in London in 1998\(^ {174}\). Following a similar model to other plays dealing with AIDS, like *As Is*\(^ {175}\) or *Love! Valour! Compassion!*\(^ {176}\), it concentrated on the personal and social impact of AIDS. In terms of musical style, Finn follows a more traditional American musical format than Larson in *Rent*, and was not considered as innovative in his work; though his use of the musical format to address AIDS was an innovative move.

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\(^{174}\) The first parts being *In Trousers* (1979) and *March of the Falsettos* (1981).


2.2.2 The Normal Heart

*The Normal Heart*, by Larry Kramer, is a seminal text in AIDS theatre. Originally staged at the Public Theatre in New York - a not for profit off-Broadway theatre - in 1985, *The Normal Heart* was first staged in Britain at the Royal Court theatre in 1986, and starred Martin Sheen as the main character Ned Weeks. In New York, its first major revival was also its Broadway premiere. In America, *The Normal Heart* made funding, and the eventual staging, of *Angels* and *Rent* possible, by showing that theatre was providing an important medium for responses to AIDS and that it would also attract audiences.

Larry Kramer’s text combines an activist message with emotional connection. His work - autobiographical in origin - follows Ned Weeks, who founds an AIDS advocacy group, much like Gay Men’s Health Crisis. Drawing on the familial and romantic relationships at the centre of the story, Kramer’s text also weaves in a variety of stories about AIDS through the men who join Weeks’s advocacy group. Kramer’s text, though overtly political, also reflects the human side of the epidemic. For every scene in which Ned Weeks details the political injustice as encountered by Kramer and his contemporaries, there is a scene that displays the human or personal cost of the epidemic. This, alongside the emotional resonance of central character Ned and his boyfriend who is diagnosed with AIDS, allows Kramer’s text to balance his political investment in AIDS campaigning within the theatrical experience. The original production featured a black wall at the rear of the set on which statistics relating to the AIDS epidemic were written, and updated during the run. The emotional core of Kramer’s piece balanced the heavy political elements, making Kramer’s the first breakthrough theatrical text on AIDS.

I recognise the importance of *The Normal Heart* as a predecessor to the texts analysed here. However, this study focuses on the longer term impact of the texts; in particular their revival in 2007. *The Normal Heart* has yet to see a London revival, which excludes it from this analysis. It was originally intended to consider *The Normal Heart* as part of the thesis; however, upon further research and reflection, the scope of the study didn’t allow for its inclusion. The staging at the Royal Court also indicates a progression of AIDS texts staged in Britain. The Royal Court was, and still is, one of London’s most influential theatres, having,
since the 1950s, provided some of the most innovative works on the London stage. As the first major production of an AIDS play in London, the Royal Court's *The Normal Heart* can be considered the first step in such plays making their way to prominence in London’s theatrical landscape. *The Normal Heart* is also highly significant in the transposing of theatrical texts on AIDS from America to Britain. Its transfer - almost directly from New York to the Royal Court in London - not only demonstrated its importance as a work on AIDS but also paved the way for *Angels* to be staged at the National, and *Rent* in the West End. It marks the chronological start to American AIDS texts in Britain, and also the progression from fringe theatre - albeit the most critically regarded of fringe theatres - to the National, and to commercial productions.

### 2.2.3 British theatrical work on AIDS

Original British theatrical output on AIDS is limited to Kevin Elyot’s *My Night with Reg* (1994) and Andy Kirby’s *Compromised Immunity* (1986); both created with the previously mentioned Gay Sweatshop Company. Elyot’s work was moderately successful; it spawned a film version and transferred to New York; albeit in a small off-Broadway theatre. In other British writing, the closest any other text comes to being an ‘AIDS Play’ is Mark Ravenhill’s much later text, *Some Explicit Polaroids* (1999). In Ravenhill’s text, while AIDS is not the central focus, the death of a character from AIDS-related illness is a significant focal point within the play. This also marks an evolution in AIDS theatre and the British take on presenting AIDS on stage. In Ravenhill’s writing, AIDS has become a part of life. It is still presented as a deeply tragic element of his characters' lives, but not their or the playwright’s primary focus for the entire text. In Ravenhill, AIDS is part of the tapestry of the character’s world. Like Elyot, the focus was on the effect on characters’ lives, rather than a political or medical analysis of the condition.

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177 The Royal Court was heralded as a bastion of new work from the 1950s, when it staged the watershed production of John Osborne’s *Look Back in Anger*, which was felt to herald a new age of British drama. The Royal Court continued this with censorship defying tactics in the 1960s, including becoming a private members club to allow performances to continue. The Royal Court is committed to fostering new talent and is often the starting point for new British writers and directors. The Royal Court’s website provides a historical overview of the theatre company <www.royalcourttheatre.com> accessed 30th March 2013.

178 *The Normal Heart* was staged at the Royal Court Theatre in 1986, directed by David Haymen and starring Martin Sheen as Ned Weeks.
This small output of British AIDS plays indicates that depictions of AIDS in original British productions were limited. The lack of British-originated AIDS plays can be linked to a variety of socio-cultural factors, as well as to the theatrical landscape of Britain. In Britain, the provision of healthcare, combined with the later impact of the epidemic, meant that cultural and political response in Britain was different to that of America. The different responses in activism and protest, cited above, are reflected in these theatrical responses. In Britain, dramas such as Elyot’s and Ravenhill’s looked at AIDS through its emotional impact on people and relationships; as part of a wider set of issues in their lives. In Britain, where healthcare was a given and the government treated AIDS seriously from the outset, the theatrical discussion shifted to personal impact. British writers were also writing later than their American counterparts; not so much following a lead as offering a different perspective and account. It stands to reason, therefore, that the most prominent theatrical texts on AIDS in Britain were two which combined the domestic, emotional response to AIDS with the political facets. This interest in importing American plays on the subject as early as 1986, however, indicates a theatrical interest in showing these works on the British stage.

### 2.3 Theatrical landscape

The ‘Theatrical landscape’ of London is of importance in considering *Angels and Rent* as depictions of AIDS on the British stage. I believe that no theatrical piece can be considered in isolation; whether this is to consider the director, actors and designer’s history, alongside the play text, to produce a more rounded understanding, or to consider the context in which it was produced. A play is also never produced in isolation. In this case, in considering two plays that addressed a culturally significant medical condition, the wider culture in which the plays were produced, and specifically the theatrical culture is significant. The theatrical landscape is considered important because it gives a sense of where these plays fit amongst their contemporaries. In considering the plays in their respective theatrical landscapes, there can be a deeper understanding of their significance.

The wider theatrical landscape of London was dominated by the musical from the late 1980s: specifically big budget spectacular pieces. John Bull\(^\text{179}\) and Alex Sirez\(^\text{180}\) have both

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written analyses that help to contextualise the theatrical landscape around these plays. These alongside the more chronological overviews such as Wandor give an overview of British theatre in this period. Exploration of musical theatre of the era, in particular the British influence on musical theatre, is also contained in works such as Elizabeth Wolloman, as explored later in this chapter.

John Bull discusses the struggling British theatre scene, both in London’s West End and nationally. He reflects on the implications of Margaret Thatcher’s Conservative government, elected in 1979, which enacted huge changes on the political, economic, social and cultural make up of Britain. Bull considers the direct impact on theatre, through funding cuts and closures, through these broader economic, social and political elements which impacted theatre in this period. His work considers a general sense of crisis in the early 1980s within British theatre, and addresses how the new ‘mainstream’ theatre was equipped to engineer its own recovery. He ends his book looking at the state of the theatrical nation in the early 1990s, and assessing what direction it may take. This is an appropriate analysis to consider prior to the analysis of Angels and Rent as Bull considered both the subsidised sector and commercial West End in his reflection.

Bull uses the wider socio-political elements of the period to discuss the impact on theatre, as well as the artistic trends this created. Specifically he reflects on the recession of the 1980s which worsened across the decade affecting the country’s employment level as well and he notes; ‘The whole spectrum of education, welfare and public spending looks set to face further cut backs’ This happened at the point of Angels and Rent coming into London’s theatrical landscape. The impact then on theatre/arts funding but also the wider cultural context was being felt as these plays were staged in London. In times of austerity risky theatrical endeavours suffer as audiences prefer to spend what limited funds they have on a known commodity, what is more as Bull points out, audiences in this sort of climate are more inclined to view a production that invokes nostalgia and happiness.

In his conclusion Bull reflects on what a breakdown of audience demographics at various plays or musicals might reveal. As noted, audience based research for theatre at this point was rare, so little statistical information is available. Bull suggests a comparison between an audience at the opening night of a new Stoppard play and a typical evening at the

\[182\] Bull, 1994, p218.
London production of *Starlight Express* as a sample comparison, presumably to indicate a wider ranging audience demographic at the latter. He goes on to conclude that, even in the absence of such hard data, such audiences would be demographically different. In Bull’s analysis the British theatre audience had substantially narrowed at this point in history. In considering the future of theatrical audiences Bull reflects on changes to the National Curriculum devaluing drama and the potential for younger audiences to dwindle to nothing.

Bull’s writing reflects not only the potential or probable audiences but the impact changes to the theatrical and wider cultural, political and economic climate had on playwrights and artistic repertoire. Bull details that, across the 1980s and into the 1990s it was increasingly difficult for even established playwrights to get new productions on stage. There was a dependency on the commercial prospects of productions with the loss of various funding and sponsorship. In this analysis Bull shows the difficult climate in terms of getting a production staged, and in terms of audience attendance, that made up the theatrical landscape in which *Angels* and *Rent* were performed.

The theatrical landscape of the West End at this point, as pointed out by Bull, was biased towards the safe, tried and tested commercial end of theatre. In 1991, the year before *Angels* was first staged, plays in London included: *Richard II*, *Pericles* and *Three Sisters*. These examples featured in the nominations for the prestigious Olivier awards, and indicate a predilection to reward revivals of ‘Classics’ in the leading London theatres. This balance between the ‘popular’ play revivals and the ‘highbrow’ revivals of classics, indicates, to some extent, a London theatre scene that was playing it safe. In the commercial West End, one of the most significant new works was *Six Degrees of Separation*. The most innovative works of this period, however, as is mostly the case in London theatre, were found in fringe venues. Prominent venues included the Royal Court (as noted above), The Donmar Warehouse and the Almeida.

The hard economic climate of the 1990s meant that artistic directors were less inclined to take risks with plays that did not sell. In considering the subsidised theatre at this time Bull notes that there was a loss of corporate sponsorship which was greatly affecting the transfer of regional productions into London. Bull also highlights the risks of new work,

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183 Ibid.
184 Bull, p219.
citing that a new production could, at this time, cost £20,000 to stage. If then, as Bull comments, a new play ran the risk of ‘closing in three weeks’ the producers would be considerably in debt, having recouped little of the investment for the production. This high risk climate, and reduction in sponsorship or other subsidy was having a marked impact on the theatre of London in particular, where costs where higher, but also more broadly across the country. However this general climate of ‘playing it safe’ is not to say that risks were not taken. The Royal Court continued to stage a variety of cutting edge works, such as *Death and the Maiden*\(^{186}\) a harrowing play about Pinochet’s regime in Chile, in 1991. Soon after *Angels* was staged, The Royal Court staged Sarah Kane’s controversial play *Blasted* (1995). This indicates that there were theatres balancing traditional or commercial output with more controversial work. The Donmar, meanwhile, began to emerge as a theatre which critic Michael Billington in *State of the Nation* called ‘exemplary in their ability to make us see familiar work in a new light,’ but also ‘essentially conservative; and quintessentially post-Thatcherite theatre’\(^{187}\).

While the desire to innovate theatrically was there; the daring subject matter, associated with plays in the style of *Angels*, was missing. The Donmar did, however, have a heavy bias towards American works; putting on many Arthur Miller revivals; Tennessee Williams classics; and Sam Shepherd’s classic *True West*. These sat alongside previously neglected British works, such as Brian Friel’s *Translations*. The Donmar was gaining a reputation for innovation based on re-working, rather than new works; which was still more challenging than many of the ‘classic’ but carbon-copy revivals in the West End at this time. Meanwhile, the Almeida was the venue chosen for premieres of Harold Pinter’s new plays in 1991 (*Party Time*) and 1993 (*Moonlight*); a trend which continued with *Celebration* in 2000. The Almeida was cultivating a reputation as an innovative theatre. It didn’t specialise in new works, but as Michael Billington points out, their varied repertoire made them significant in London theatre: ‘with a programme that included Euripides, Moliere, Racine, Dryden, Jonson, Chekhov, Isben, Shaw, Pirandello, Brecht and Lorca, it explored the canon of world drama.’ This makes the significant point that a place which emerged as a leading theatre in the London landscape was exploring a wider range of drama. The London theatrical landscape did offer a wide range of plays, both new and old at this point.


Aleks Sierz details the more revolutionary or innovative theatre during this era in his work on ‘In yer face theatre’ (as he terms it). This description denotes a kind of theatre that is shocking to an audience and designed to challenge them through this element of shock. This is often coupled with a drive towards political statement or other declaration, as Sierz notes ‘Usually when writers use shock tactics, it is because they have something urgent to say’. Sierz points to avant garde theatre and new writers creating a changing landscape in British theatre in the 1990s. He goes as far as to declare that ‘As far as that decade was concerned, contemporary theatre was in-yer-face theatre’. While I argue that this claim is too sweeping, and that the plays analysed in this study indicate that there were innovative or daring new works which fall short of Sierz’s category, the ‘in yer face’ style was a significant element of 1990s theatre. However, as the majority of this work, in particular that to which Sierz draws attention in his analysis, falls within fringe theatre it only forms a backdrop to, rather than direct influence on, the West End and National Theatre facets of the theatrical landscape in which this work is focused. Sierz’s work is however important to note, in part as a counter point to Bull’s projection that all innovative work in the 1990s was in real danger of halting. As noted, both Angels and Rent fall somewhat short of what Sierz would term ‘in yer face theatre’ and neither were produced by fringe or more avant garde theatre companies (though Cheek By Jowl are considered a modern, innovative and progressive company) both productions indicate that new innovative work was being staged despite the difficult and conservative climate of the West End and subsidised sector.

It is fair to say that the West End was by far the more conservative end of the spectrum. While the National Theatre - as fitting for a theatre with its artistic remit and cultural responsibility - was attempting a balance between classic repertoire and new work; fringe and subsidised theatres continued to produce new writing of a provocative nature. Innovation does not just mean new works; as Mendes’ rule at this playhouse proved. Nor does it mean new playwrights; as the Pinter invasion at the Almeida shows. Innovation was happening both in the way plays were staged and the way through which plays were included. Though the West End was dominated by safer choices and revivals; the fringe and the National itself were developing innovations that the commercially dependant West End could not hope for. These are just some of the significant productions that were adjacent to Angels in terms of the Production Company and producing theatre; and which also give an insight

188 Sierz, Aleks, In Yer Face Theatre, Faber and Faber, 2001, p5
189 Ibid. P xiii
into the wider theatrical landscape of the time. This serves to indicate the cultural and creative setting in which these texts were performed. The real innovation in theatre was taking place off the West End at this time; both in fringe and at the National.

2.3.1 The National Theatre

In relation to this landscape, it is pertinent to discuss here some of the key productions at the National Theatre, which directly proceeded, succeeded, or played in repertory with *Angels*. In the case of the National Theatre, there has until recently been no comprehensive historical work on the institution. To coincide with the 50th Anniversary of the National in 2013, however, a full history of the theatre was published. Daniel Rosenthal’s *The National Theatre Story*\(^\text{190}\) offers a detailed history of the Theatre Company and productions staged. Rosenthal, who as the first official historian of the National had full access to archives, as well as opportunity to speak to those involved, offers an in-depth account of the development of the National Theatre Company through the building work of four artistic directors. Rosenthal’s account also gives detail on productions; allowing for a historical picture of the National’s performance history, alongside the behind the scenes narrative. Another, previous, detailed history of the National may be found in Peter Lewis’s volume *The National: A Dream Made Concrete*\(^\text{191}\). Though comprehensive, Lewis’s work only reaches the late 1980s, therefore giving a view up to the point of this thesis's analysis, but not across it. That Lewis’s work is not an ‘authorized’ work, which, in his own words, ‘looks at the National through the independent eyes of the theatregoer’\(^\text{192}\), could be considered an advantage; its removal from ‘official’ or ‘authorised’ accounts giving Lewis freedom of his opinion in relation to the National. However, what Lewis’ account lacks is the access and information that an official account would hold.

Official works relating to the National, at present, are limited to photo books such as *In Rehearsal at the National*\(^\text{193}\); with the exception of one detailed work, by actor Simon Callow: *The National Theatre and its Work 1963-1997*\(^\text{194}\), which covers the period of *Angels* staging. Much of the information gathered about the National for this thesis, which is not

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covered in these limited texts, is derived from material at the National Theatre’s Archives. Other records of the National’s history may be found in the respective autobiographies of its artistic directors;\textsuperscript{195} including Richard Eyre’s diaries which cover the period of Angles.\textsuperscript{196}

The National has been an integral part of the British theatrical landscape since its inception in 1962 and continued to be so after the move to the Southbank theatre in 1976. Angels was staged in 1992 at the National, under the tenure of its third artistic director, Richard Eyre, who began his tenure in 1988. Eyre took over at a tumultuous time for the National. The late 1980s were a time of great financial strain for the arts in Britain and the National lost a great deal of its subsidy. The years 1985-1988, at the end of Peter Hall’s tenure, were particularly problematic financially, as outlined by Peter Lewis in his account of the National’s history.\textsuperscript{197} The financial strain the National faced during these years\textsuperscript{198} impacted creative output; not least when the Cottesloe - the space in which Angels was performed - was closed temporarily.\textsuperscript{199} The Cottesloe was re-opened following a grant from the Greater London Council (GLC) in 1987.\textsuperscript{200}

The artistic approach of Eyre, during his tenure, is of note, in relation to the theatrical landscape within the National Theatre at the time at which Angels was staged. There was an emphasis on staging ‘classics’ in the first years of his directorship. Lewis\textsuperscript{201} highlights the statistics of classics versus new work during Eyre’s first years. He criticises Eyre for this; noting the National’s claimed artistic aim that appeared in the programmes at the time:

‘To present a diverse repertoire, embracing classic, new and neglected plays from the whole world of drama; to present to the very highest standards; to give audiences a choice of at least six different productions at any one time’\textsuperscript{202}

\textsuperscript{195} Though biography and autobiography exist for all of the National’s directors - apart from the two most recent: Sir Trevor Nunn and Sir Nick Hytner - the main resource for this study was Richard Eyre’s diarised autobiography National Service Diary of a Decade at the National Theatre, London: Bloomsbury, 2003.

\textsuperscript{196} Eyre, Richard, National Service Diary of a Decade at the National Theatre, London: Bloomsbury, 2003.


\textsuperscript{198} The National’s funding across these years was less than the 5% inflation rate (2.9% in 1984, 4.1 % in 1986-7, nil in 1987-8 and 1.3% in 1988-9); the cumulative decrease over these years being £2 million. Lewis, P, The National: A dream made concrete, 1990, p 181.

\textsuperscript{199} The closure of the Cottesloe was announced by Peter Hall in his so-called ‘coffee table speech,’ following the Arts Council funding announcements in 1985. Lewis, P, p 172.


\textsuperscript{202} Lewis, p 229.
This remit would have been ambitious in the most financially secure of times and even more so in the troubled financial climate of the late 1980s when Eyre came to the National. Eyre’s artistic approach around the time of *Angels*’ production illustrates a trend towards ‘safe’ productions. Eyre’s directing work included several Shakespeare productions, including directing Ian McKellan in *Richard II* and *Richard III*.\(^{203}\) He also directed a variety of works including Tennessee Williams’s *The Night of the Iguana*\(^ {204}\) and classic plays such as Chekov’s *Uncle Vanya*.\(^ {205}\) He is probably best remembered for collaborations with David Hare in the *David Hare Trilogy*,\(^ {206}\) which also showed his commitment to showcasing British playwrights. Eyre also oversaw the production of several major musicals, including revivals of *Carousel*\(^ {207}\) and *Sweeney Todd*.\(^ {208}\) In this manner, he combined classics such as *Carousel* - which are likely to secure audiences - with more difficult work by playwrights like Sondheim that are more challenging to audiences and therefore more difficult to produce and sell successfully. Eyre also directed the highly successful production of *Guys and Dolls*,\(^ {209}\) showing commercially viable work that was produced with an eye to artistic endeavour.

The staging of two ambitious and demanding productions at the National Theatre, under the remit of two separate artistic directors,\(^ {210}\) as well as the involvement of prominent theatre company Cheek by Jowl, indicates how significant Kushner’s work was considered, even prior to its staging. Cheek by Jowl is the joint effort of director Declan Donnellan and designer Nick Ormerod. Cheek by Jowl are discussed here since they are relevant to understand the context in which Kushner’s play was realised. Founded in 1986 Cheek by Jowl are an international company that has performed in multiple languages including French and Russian. Cheek by Jowl Specialising in Jacobean drama *Angels* was the first work by a living playwright that Donnellan and Ormerod had tackled.

\(^{203}\) *Richard II* and *Richard III* directed by Richard Eyre, 1997, Olivier Theatre.

\(^{204}\) Williams, Tennessee, Director Richard Eyre, Lyttelton 6th February 1992.

\(^{205}\) Chekhov, Anton, adapted by Pam Gems, *Uncle Vanya*, Director Sean Mathias, Cottesloe 25th February (Studio) 1992.


\(^{207}\) Rogers, R and Hammerstein, O, 1945, music by Richard Rodgers, book & lyrics by Oscar Hammerstein, based on the play *Liliom* by Ferenc Molnár as adapted by Benjamin F Glaser, Director Nicholas Hytner, Lyttelton 10th December 1992.

\(^{208}\) Sondheim, S, 1979, music & lyrics by Stephen Sondheim, book by Hugh Wheeler from an adaptation by Christopher Bond, Director Declan Donnellan, Cottesloe 2nd June 1993.


\(^{210}\) Nicholas Hytner commissioned Caroline or Change in 2006 having taken over from Trevor Nunn in 2003 as artistic director. Richard Eyre who commissioned Angels in America for the National Theatre was Nunn’s predecessor, being artistic director from 1987-1997. Artistic directors prior to this were Peter Hall (1973-1988) and Laurence Olivier (1963-1973)
The company name is taken from Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*; ‘Follow! Nay, I’ll go with thee cheek by jowl.’ This name was chosen to imply intimacy between the actors, text and audience. This artistic remit Donnellan comments comes from the need for a text rich and dynamic enough to sustain the company; ‘Over a long tour, the ideal text will feed us, surprise us, and remain, perhaps, just out of reach. This is why the bulk of our work has been in the classics.’ The company is known for producing Shakespearean or other period works with a modern approach that goes beyond simply a modern setting and costume. Cheek By Jowl are therefore known for re-workings of classic literature for the stage or premiers of more obscure works by famous playwrights, as with Tennessee Williams’ *Out Cry* (1997). The company also perform new works such as artistic director Donnellan’s *Lady Betty* (1989). Cheek by Jowl’s most famous production was their 1991 production of *As you like it*. It was distinctive in that it comprised of an all-male cast, an innovative throwback to the model of Shakespeare’s original works and one that brought Cheek by Jowl to the attention of the mainstream press. The similarities between the sweeping narrative of Angels with its large cast of characters and doubling of roles means that despite its contemporary setting in both form and content it was not significantly different to the previous work Cheek by Jowl had tackled.

Cheek By Jowl working on *Angels in America* was significant in its departure from their artistic remit, and in the working relationship with a playwright as Donnellan has said; ‘Tony was the first living playwright I’d worked with, and during the rehearsal process he seemed very likely to join the ranks of the dead’211. The manner in which Donnellan and Ormerod’s rehearsal process worked, developed through the style of theatre Cheek By Jowl specialised in, was very different to the process Kushner was used to. Donnellan’s approach was to focus on an extended ‘period of exploration’ in the rehearsal room and this approach, without fixed aims or ideas was unnerving to the playwright. Kushner, who had come into the process in London with fixed ideas based on the work-shopped productions about how the play should be staged. This approach was jarring with Donellan’s approach to directing which was a genuine process of exploration for the actors212.

The relationship between the playwright, who sat in for the first two weeks of rehearsal, and Donnellan, used to working only with his partner Ormerod, quickly became difficult. Kushner, perhaps displaying the neurosis of a young writer in a foreign environment thought, based on the set design, that Donnellan and Ormerod were not taking his play

212 Ibid.
seriously. Kushner was forced into taking a step back from the production and allowing Donnellan to work. Kushner was allowed into the second preview in London under the following condition from Donnellan who told Kushner ‘I’m not taking any more notes from you unless you sit in the middle of the auditorium without a notebook. You must experience it like the audience.’ Kushner was both pleasantly surprised by the production, and altered his view of the process saying ‘[it] had blossomed in a way that hadn’t seemed possible… I learned that directing is not sculpting. It’s about releasing energy, not imprisoning it.’ This process indicates the different manner of working for this production to what Kushner had experienced in American theatre, and the significance of a different kind of directing team taking on Angels.

The approach of Donnellan and Ormerod ultimately appeared to work well for Angels. The process of putting on Perestroika was equally fractious with revisions to the script coming in almost continually. The actors struggled with this, particularly coming after running part one for several months. During this process, although the play was, according to Donnellan developing to be better, it was also increasingly longer. The relationship between director and playwright had mellowed to this point following the success of part one and Donnellan integrated the majority of changes as Kushner provided them right up to the end of previews. Kushner ended the process full of praise for Donnellan’s direction and attributing much of the play’s success to it. He notes that Donnellan was able to pull together scenes in ways he hadn’t thought of, linking them together so that ‘a play that is really bump, bump, bump [became] like a dance.’ This directing process, and the results that it gleaned, were highly significant for Angels. Donnellan cites the audience reaction as ‘overwhelming’ and credits the ‘imagination, sharpness, cleverness and humanity’ of Kushner’s writing. Kushner meanwhile is aware of the significance of this production, and its success thanks to Donnellan’s direction. Kushner says that ‘The play was done all over the world Singapore and Africa and Romania, everywhere and I think that having been done at the National is what made it’. The production, with all its struggles, and the fact that it was a success at the National illustrates the significance of both the director’s approach to Angels which made it a success, and the theatre which gave it a national platform and status.

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213 Kushner thought the American flag design at the back of the set was indicative of their wanting only to make fun of America Rosenthal, Daniel, The National Theatre Story, Oberon Books, 2013, p 528
216 Kushner in Rosenthal, 2013, p532
217 Donnellan in Rosenthal, 2013, p532
2.3.2 Musical Theatre

In musical theatre there was a definite trend for a certain kind of musical output, led by Andrew Lloyd Webber and Cameron Macintosh. The top three longest running musicals at the time were also British: *Les Miserables*,218 *Phantom of the Opera*219 and *Blood Brothers*,220 showing the trend for big budget, spectacular musicals or reliable commodities in plays. The big-budget spectacles of Lloyd Webber and Macintosh helped create new expectations of musical theatre. These musicals didn’t rely on an actor as ‘star,’ but introduced the concept of the musical as ‘star,’ in and of itself. Often this was related to a specific set piece or selling point. So in *Miss Saigon*, people came to see the helicopter fly; in *Phantom of the Opera*, the Chandelier crash. These shows also became the first to have logos as their posters; a marketing tool for instant, worldwide recognition, meaning that a show can run indefinitely without alteration to its marketing.221 These mega musicals were dominated by the works of Andrew Lloyd Webber, who composed hits such as *Phantom of the Opera*222 and *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*.223 At the same time, Cameron Macintosh had an equally commanding effect on the theatrical landscape with works he produced, such as *Miss Saigon*224 and *Les Miserables*.225 All of these musicals went on to be long running hits that were exported internationally; including to Broadway.226

These works, though sometimes derided by critics, were largely British made: Lloyd Webber, working with lyricist Tim Rice in his early career, developed and premiered his work in

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221 Previously marketing usually relied on, and still does for most shows, an image of the cast or stars of the show. In using a logo, like *Miss Saigon* or *Phantom of the Opera* does, the show can be recast without altering promotional material.
225 Ibid.
London. Rice himself collaborated with a more international set of composers; notably Boubil and Schonberg: the team behind Miss Saigon and Les Miserables. Lloyd Webber aside, other new British works included Matador, with the then up and coming musical star John Barrowman in the leading role,227 and Honk!228 by British composing duo Stiles and Drew, who would go on to write the internationally successful stage version of Mary Poppins for Disney.229 This period also saw successful revivals of Cabaret, and a critical, if not commercial, success for Terrance McNally’s Kiss of the Spider Woman.230 Both of these productions are significant for their portrayal of homosexuality, and for their authors’ other work, centred on AIDS. Elsewhere in musical theatre, the notable but small scale AIDS musical Elegies for Angels, Punks and Raging Queens231 made its debut.

It is evident that the landscape into which Angels and Rent were staged was varied. The commercial West End, and in particular musical theatre, was dominated by a particular kind of big budget spectacle. The National Theatre, hampered by budget constraints in the years leading up to the production of Angels, was more reliant than ever on classic texts to bring in audiences. In both settings then, producing American plays addressing AIDS was a gamble; for the producers financing the National’s production of Angels and for the commercial production of Rent. Both potentially challenging to an audience, they also ran the ever present risk, when bringing a play from America, of being ‘lost in translation’. Equally, both had styles that were considered more experimental than the proven commodities of either an Andrew Lloyd Webber musical or a traditional Shakespearean piece. The depiction of AIDS is only one facet of transposing these plays to the British stage, but it will be used as the conduit for considering how these plays were received.

228 Stiles and Drew, Honk!, 1993.
230 McNally, T, Kiss of the Spider Woman, 1983.
2.3.3 Theatrical dialogue

The term ‘theatrical dialogue,’ as used here, encompasses the constant theatrical cultural exchange that takes place between Britain and America. Theatre is by its nature a collaborative art form, and this collaboration has long since transcended cultural boundaries. Theatrical dialogue, or exchange, when a play, musical, opera or other performance is adopted by another nation, is nothing new; theatrical import and exchange is a vital facet of the art form. The theatrical dialogue and exchange between Britain and America however, echoes the so-called ‘special relationship’ of these two countries in the wider sense. America and Britain have influenced and exchanged each other’s theatrical productions, perhaps to a greater degree than any other two countries.

Elizabeth Sharland’s text on musical theatre\(^\text{232}\) gives an overview of the theatrical exchange between Britain and America. British musicals, led by Lloyd Webber and Macintosh, as outlined above, led the British invasion of Broadway. The strong influence of British work on the Broadway stage is also of note. As mentioned, \textit{Phantom of the Opera, Les Miserables, Cats and Starlight Express}\(^\text{233}\), amongst others, had been exported to Broadway.\(^\text{234}\) In Britain these were innovative musicals, which reshaped the genre.

There are several historical accounts of British theatre and musical theatre which are useful in understanding these plays in context. Richard Eyre and Nicholas Wright’s text \textit{Changing Stages: A view of British and American Theatre in the Twentieth Century}\(^\text{235}\) is significant.


\(^{233}\) Lloyd Webber exported many of his successful productions to New York, including \textit{Evita} (1979), \textit{Phantom of the Opera} (1988) and \textit{Cats} (1982). Other productions have had North. The only productions Lloyd Webber has not exported to Broadway are \textit{The Beautiful Game} - his 2000 musical about football, co-written with Ben Elton (who previously had success with the book of \textit{We Will Rock You}); the subject matter of a local football team may be responsible for the lack of American interest. The second Lloyd Webber musical yet to be performed in America in any form being \textit{Love Never Dies} (2010); the critically panned sequel to \textit{Phantom of the Opera}. Critical and commercial failure in the UK are likely factors in its lack of transfer to date.

\(^{234}\) Eyre, Richard and Wright, Nicholas, \textit{Changing Stages: A view of British and American Theatre in the
in drawing attention to the theatrical exchange between Britain and America. There has been, as these works explore in further detail, a substantial and continued exchange of theatrical productions between the New York and London theatrical landscapes. However, Sharland makes an important point for this thesis, about musical theatre between the two countries: ‘Even when the same shows are produced in both cities, unless the entire case is the same, the result will be different’. She goes on to comment that ‘The audiences do not like the same things, they do not laugh at the same jokes, so shows can succeed on Broadway and flop on the West End and vice versa.’ What Sharland is drawing attention to here is the differences in reception between the two countries; she also highlights the fact that both New York and London are considered the focal points of theatre in their respective countries. Sharland goes on to draw attention to the economic issues of producing work on Broadway; noting that in 2009, when she writes, many American playwrights are producing their work in Britain first, much as Tony Kushner did with Angels. It is therefore fair to say during this period that the cultural exchange of musicals was weighted in favour of the British; few American musicals were creating an impact in the West End.

The dynamics of Broadway and West End transfers are not simple or straightforward; dependant as they are on many different factors. The seeming ease with which Andrew Lloyd Webber and Cameron Macintosh transferred their work across the Atlantic is not representative of the larger picture. The financial power behind both of the these producers - thanks to phenomenal successes in Britain - allowed either self-financed transfers or ensured the willingness of financial backers; a luxury not afforded to most other composers, playwrights and producers. Peter H. Riddle’s work offers a similar historical picture of British and American musical theatre to Sharland, and further context is found in the works of John Bush Jones and Larry Stempel who provide historical and contextual overviews of America and the Broadway musical. More specific analysis is found in Bruce Kirle’s work, which offers a contextualised analysis of the production process and theatrical landscape.

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236 Sharland, Elizabeth, The British on Broadway: Backstage and Beyond - the Early Years, Barbican Press. p28.
237 Sharland, p 31.
238 Sharland, p 35.
against which *Rent* was produced in America. And a more specific context for *Rent* as part of the canon of ‘rock musicals’ is found in Elizabeth L. Wollman’s work,\(^{243}\) which enables a genre based comparative reading of *Rent* alongside the context provided by Kirle and Riddle.

While the weighting in musical theatre was in favour of British exports; there were still a number of American musicals staged in Britain. Revivals of Rogers and Hammerstein classics, such as *Show Boat* at the National in 1991, indicate a British theatrical appetite for American musical theatre. Indeed, in 1991, the nominations for the Olivier awards in musical theatre were dominated by American productions, with, in particular, *The King and I, Show Boat* and *Sunday in the Park with George* dominating. Again, in 1997 - the year before *Rent* arrived in London - productions of *Guys and Dolls* and *Tommy* both had substantial awards nominations. However, these were not having the same impact as the ‘British invasion’ of the Lloyd Webber and Macintosh mould. Sondheim’s *Sweeney Todd*\(^{244}\) won an Olivier award for its premiere production in London in 1980, but American musical productions making an impact in London theatre were limited at this time. While it seemed on first glance that musical theatre had been taken over by Lloyd Webber and Macintosh, giving Britain dominance in the Anglo-American theatrical exchange, it is clear that in London, American musical theatre maintained a presence. This presence, however, was dominated by revivals. With the exception of *Tommy*, which can be considered one of the newer wave rock-musicals that *Rent* helped cement as a genre, the notable American musicals in Britain were revivals of classics.

In London’s West End, the longest running production is Agatha Christie’s *The Mousetrap*\(^{245}\) with plays *The Woman in Black* and *No Sex Please, We’re British* also included in the top ten. The top three longest running musicals are also British: *Les Miserables,*\(^{246}\) *Phantom of the Opera*\(^{247}\) and *Blood Brothers.*\(^{248}\) In considering the theatrical landscape into which *Rent* was inserted, it is interesting to note the strong influence of British work on the Broadway stage: within the previous decade, *Phantom of the Opera, Les Miserables, Cats* and *Starlight Express,*\(^{249}\) amongst others, had been exported to Broadway. In Britain these

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246 Schönberg, Claude-Michel and Boublil, Alain, 1985
249 Lloyd Webber, Andrew, 1984.
were innovative musicals; if not reinventing the genre then certainly reshaping it. In America, they firmly deviated from the model of the American musical, set forth by Rogers and Hammerstein and latterly by Sondheim’s own reshaping of the musical. Despite this deviation, Broadway embraced the mega-musical with as much, if not more, enthusiasm than the West End.

In terms of plays, there was an established dialogue between Britain and America. At this point it was probably a more even, steady exchange than the musical theatre exchange. American plays, from playwrights such as Arthur Miller, Tennessee Williams and later David Mamet, had seen a steady export to Britain, almost since their premieres in America, from the 1940s onwards. In terms of export - Shakespeare aside - prominent British dramatists had found success in America; including Harold Pinter and David Hare. Later, in the 1990s, there would be, what appeared to be, a mini invasion of British plays. Plays from less established playwrights, like Patrick Marber and Martin McDonagh, transferred straight to Broadway in the mid-1990s; while David Hare also saw a successful return there. This was not of the same level as the ‘British invasion’ of the mega musicals, but it did show that the dialogue between the two theatrical landscapes continued with new and established playwrights.

The historical context, both in relation to AIDS and to the theatrical landscape on to which these texts were transposed, gives a valuable insight when considering the potential impact of Angels and Rent as theatrical texts relating to AIDS. What this cannot extrapolate is the potential reading of these texts in a British context. Having outlined this historical context, and examined some of the existing literature surrounding the subject of AIDS and the theatrical landscape that these plays exist in, the plays themselves will now be analysed. The transposition of Angels and Rent to the British theatrical landscape, and the resultant depictions of AIDS, will be considered. Considering the facets outlined in the research questions, and beginning chronologically with Angels, the following chapters explore these texts, AIDS; and the theatrical landscape of London.
Chapter 3 American Angels on the National Stage: Tony Kushner’s Angels in America

3.1 Introduction

Tony Kushner’s Angels in America was once referred to as ‘the most talked about, written about and awarded play of the past decade or more.’ The National Theatre production was produced in January 1992. Although there were previous productions of Angels, the play was still very much in development as the London premiere approached. The text that was presented at the National marks the first performance of the finished product. The full production of the two plays, Millennium and Perestroika, took place almost simultaneously in both London and New York.

Angels in America is comprised of two plays, as noted in Chapter One. Part one is called Angels in America: Millennium Approaches, and subtitled A gay fantasia on National Themes; and Part Two Angels in America: Perestroika. The two parts of Angels are two parts of a whole text. Therefore, when referring to the overall piece Angels is used in reference to the entire work; however, when discussing specific scenes the two parts Millennium or Perestroika will be used to indicate the individual parts of the play.

Kushner was heavily influenced by the work of Walter Benjamin. In Angels Kushner’s draws on Benjamin’s work, particularly through the device of the Angels. Benjamin’s maxim that ‘the state of emergency’ in which we live is ‘not the exception but the rule’ is a fitting one for AIDS. In addition, Benjamin in his Ninth Thesis on the Philosophy of History uses the metaphor of the ‘angel of history’. Kushner’s Angel borrows heavily from Benjamin’s writing:

‘But a storm is blowing through Paradise; it has got caught in [the angel’s] wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. The storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.’

\[\text{References:}\]

251 The world premiere took place at Eureka Theatre Company, who commissioned the piece in May 1991.
252 The National Theatre production was the first fully staged production of both Millennium in 1992 and both parts in 1993/4. The final revisions to the printed work, and therefore the version of the play used in subsequent productions, were published in 1995.
253 The London Production opened on 20th November 1993 with the New York production following on 23rd November 1993.
255 Benjamin, p 257-8
This quotation highlights the ideas of a nation or a people in a state of emergency. This ‘storm of progress’ forms a central element in Kushner’s use of the Angels to discuss AIDS in his text. In the case of Prior there is an indication that in being seemingly politically benign before his diagnosis, he is then propelled into political consciousness by his encounters with the Angels and by AIDS. In fighting the Angels, Prior becomes politically engaged and so contributes to progress by becoming engaged with political discourse.

The influence of both Tennessee Williams and Walter Benjamin as a philosophical influence helped shape Kushner’s identity as a playwright. Therefore both heavily influence Kushner’s philosophical approach to his plays, a key theatrical influence is that of Brechtian theatre combined with American theatrical traditions and approaches in particular the style of Tennessee Williams. Williams was a strong influence. A combination of Williams’ style and personal circumstance drew Kushner to him at an early age, as he comments; ‘I fell in love with Tennessee because he was a southern writer and I grew up in Louisiana. The voice was very familiar and powerful to me because he was gay.’

For Kushner the style of theatrical language Williams used was highly influential. He says that Williams ‘succeeded in finding a poetic diction for the stage.’ The way that Kushner describes Williams’ writing as ‘tension between artifice, naturalism, and spontaneity in art’ is a description apt for Kushner’s own style. Kushner was clearly strongly influenced by the writing style approaches of Williams. He takes, as Williams does, microcosms and personal stories of American life to reflect the wider politics and issues he wishes to draw attention to. Kushner adopts a similar approach with his characters, albeit with an infusion of the supernatural as influenced by the philosophical approaches noted above, and by the theatrical format of Brechtian epic theatre.

Throughout Angels Kushner demonstrates across the text elements of Brechtian influence, driven by Brechtian Epic theatre traditions. Walter Benjamin provides an eloquent account of the changes in theatre brought about by epic theatre. Epic theatre places actor and audience in a joint project in relation to the play they are performing and watching, removing the theoretical (and often literal) space that had previously existed between them. Benjamin insists that efforts be made to keep history from being understood in terms of present conditions (a tendency he saw in traditional understandings of history): ‘[i]n every era the attempts must be made anew to wrest tradition away from a conformism that is about to
overpower it.¹²⁵⁹ In Kushner’s play, his use of recent history conforms to these Epic Theatre ideas, while the style in which the play is performed conforms to the Brechtian elements that influence Epic Theatre as outlined by Benjamin.

The actor-driven nature of the play emphasises Kushner’s Brechtian influences. This is seen in the opening of the play where prompt script instructions are that a member of the company (alternated across performances) brings on the globe that sits at centre of set and the remaining company gather around it to begin the performance.²⁶⁰ This in the case of the National’s production, sees the director, Donnellan, using the actor driven style for symbolic purpose which he does across the text using small affective details. For example, the company freezes in their clearing of the set when Roy shouts ‘Hold’ into his phone²⁶¹; and at the same time Harper sets up her scene from the set of the previous scene.²⁶² Donnellan peppers the performance with such nuances, made possible by this style and directing approach. This was recognised in reviews as being integral to the production. Michael Billington wrote in his review notes: ‘[a]ctors double as stagehands and cover scenic transitions with the aid of smoke machines.’²⁶³ The company cohesiveness created by an actor driven performance such as this, and strengthened by the fact that many actors double up playing more than one role, allows Donnellan to create a complex production that expands on the written word of Kushner’s text.

The idea of doubling and the significance of the actors as a company highlighted by Kushner are intrinsic in bringing his work to life.²⁶⁴ He is specific that the play is written for eight actors and that they double. Kushner has made it clear in interviews discussing his play each doubling of roles has significance for the characters but it also fosters a sense of community.²⁶⁵ He highlighted this approach in discussion at one of the accompanying ‘Platform’ events at the National Theatre. Donnellan, also a part of the discussion echoed this.²⁶⁶ National’s production during one of the accompanying ‘Platform’ events. It is true that in some cases the doubling takes place more for convenience;²⁶⁷ but also comments that in

²⁵⁹ Benjamin 1968, p 255
²⁶⁰ Angels, Bible copy, np.
²⁶¹ Kushner, Millennium, 1993, Act 1, Scene 2, p 17
²⁶² Ibid.
²⁶⁴ Full details of the characters and narrative can be found in Appendix 2.
²⁶⁷ An actor who is not used in adjacent scenes making most practical sense, this applies, for example, to the role of the Rabbi in the opening scene. The Rabbi is played by the actor playing Hannah, an actor not in the scene and not required for several scenes.
other instances, doubling supports symbolic or thematic elements of the text. That the
classic of devout Mormon sister Ella Chapter is played by the same actor as the Angel is
probably intended as subtle humour on Kushner’s part, and relates to the relationship between
the Mormon religion and Angels. A further example of effective doubling in relation to the
depiction of AIDS is shown by the actor playing the Angel also playing the role of Prior’s
nurse. This doubling links the characters in the minds of members of the audience, making
the impact of the Angel in relation to Prior’s AIDS diagnosis paralleled with the medical
scenes in which the same actor also appears. These two examples are effective yet subtle
means of communication with an audience. All the characters double as Angels in Part 2,
which is an effective use of doubling by Kushner to incorporate all the actors in this scene,
and neatly concludes his use of this technique.

Doubling is an important Brechtian and Epic convention, contributing to Brecht’s
famous alienation technique, or Verfremdungseffekt. This creates a feeling for an audience
of always being aware that the actor is playing a part and the actor should always be analysing
and commenting on his part as if they are "reading" it for the first time. As such, the actor
should say his lines ‘not as if he were improvising it himself but like a quotation... At the
same time he obviously has to render all the quotation's overtones, the remark's full human
and concrete shape.’ The quotation from Brecht here indicates that the purpose and form of
the alienation technique is to distance the audience sufficiently to engage them further with
the issues being presented via performance. Though Angels is not a purely Brechtian play,
either in Kushner’s writing or Donnellan’s direction, both the writing and direction draw on
Brechtian traditions.

In doubling characters, as Kushner does, the audience questions what they experience.
They question what is seen via the actors, but at the same time, they are still involved in the
narrative and so continue to engage with the political and moral statements of the text.
Kushner also uses cross-gendered casting at several points. This, in part, is related to
available actors at any given point in the play, but also assists Kushner’s subtle points on
queering identity and queer identities which are seen across the play. Key examples of
Kushner using doubling in this way include the man in the park with whom Louis has a
sexual encounter, played by the actor also playing Prior. He is being used as a commentary on

268 The Mormon religion was founded when an Angel appeared to founder Joseph Smith. Kushner has frequently
stated that his inspiration for writing the play stemmed from a desire to write about ‘Mormons, Roy Cohn and
AIDS.’ A variation of this quotation may be found in the National Theatre programme, p6.
Louis’ actions and acts as a cue to the audience regarding the impact of his actions in this scene. The queering of identities created by Kushner’s doubling aligns his text as a queer text. By integrating all of his actors into this method, Kushner is able to make a strong point about community action and responsibility. By pulling together all the actors in one scene as the Angels, with the audience having watched these actors perform several parts across the play, he incorporates the sense of community and responsibility. In so doing, Kushner is able to enhance the symbolic action of the Angel characters more than if he had used individual casting.

3.1.1 Staging Angels at The National Theatre

The staging of Angels, an untested American work of this scale, at the National Theatre is indicative both of an understanding of its importance as a text and recognition of Kushner’s significance as a contemporary American playwright. Kushner commented on his feelings about the British production of Angels in advance of its performance: ‘I feel tremendously excited, honoured that the Royal National Theatre want to do it. I’m also very nervous…But I don’t know how British audiences will respond.’ Kushner here illustrates the importance of the specific production of a play. Kushner was naturally nervous: staging at the National was a big undertaking for a young, relatively unknown playwright. It is argued here that Kushner, while having reason to be concerned that certain aspects were not as accessible to British audiences, produced a play that overall communicated effectively with audiences in London. It is also contended that Angels presented British audiences with an informative and accessible piece of AIDS theatre. Finally, it is asserted that Angels contributed to the overall theatrical landscape of London.

The text of a play is both written word and physical realisation. As noted in the introduction, the use of archival record played a key part in researching this production. I was unable to view a recording of this production, as at the time the National Theatre did not record all productions, as it does today. However, the National Theatre archives do keep substantial records which assisted in developing an understanding of this production. The main documents used in studying Angels were the prompt scripts for each production; comprising the script as written by Kushner, alongside additional instructions relating to

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271 Full record of the archival holdings for the National Theatre production of Angels in America found in the bibliography.
staging. These incredibly detailed scripts are used by the Stage Manager to run the show every night, and contain every detail from props needed to lighting and sound cues. In reading these texts the details of the production can be fully understood; giving insight into the direction choices and production details that would not be available through reviews or the original script. In addition, I used rehearsal photographs, production photographs, costume design plans and stage blueprints to gain a sense of the design of the production. Again these resources add an element of understanding through the production details they give and allow for a visualisation of the performance. In seeing how the actor’s appeared in a given scene, their costume, images of the staging around them, brings a production to life. The combination of the images with the prompt script allows for a deeper understanding of the staging.

Additional materials held on this production included the National’s Platform recording. ‘Platforms’ are events held in conjunction with productions at the National; people associated with the production discuss aspects of the play, including actors, designers, directors and writers. The participants are usually interviewed by a person knowledgeable in the field - for example, another director or writer - and often include an open question and answer section with the audience. In the case of Angels there are four related Platform recordings; three from the original run, and one as part of a retrospective on National Theatre Productions in 1999.272 These Platforms cover a range of discussion topics from the inspiration behind the plays, giving further insight into the creative process behind Angels and understanding of the inspiration and motivation behind the plays.

In David Roman's exploration of the experience of watching Angels in 1992, as described previously, he focuses on the ritual of performance and the impact it has on the reception of the ideas in the text.273 Roman uses an auto-ethnographic approach, contextualising the play personally in this instance, drawing on Schechner's theorising of performance, noting ‘the importance of the underlying social event as a nest for the theatrical event.’274 Roman here is describing the auto-ethnographic experience of the theatrical event, in this case seeing Angels, on the same night as the American Presidential Election. Roman explores in this chapter the importance the social experience of seeing this play at this

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time, which he links to his friends’ personal experiences and the wider socio-political
landscape. Although, given the retrospective nature of this study, an approach such as
Roman’s is not possible; this approach raises an important issue. The theatrical event does
not take place in a vacuum, and the reception a piece receives is influenced by external
factors. In the viewing of *Angels* Roman describes his influence by both personal and wider
socio-cultural factors: personally, Roman is affected by those friends who have AIDS, some
of whom attend with him; on a wider scale, Roman is affected by the political landscape of
America and the impending Presidential election. For London audience, attending *Angels* was
an experience influenced not only by their personal situations and experience of AIDS, but by
the wider socio-cultural nexus. Those viewing the play in London would naturally bring a
different set of socio-cultural and personal influences to their viewing of the play, and while
these are not quantifiable they are worth noting.

For Roman, drawing on Schechner’s approach, this moment in history and this play
were symbiotic. Using Schechner’s work on audiences, Marvin Carlson states that all urban
spaces and particularly theatres are ‘haunted’\(^{275}\), embodying cultural pasts and presents. In
the case of *Angels* the production is ‘haunted’ by the previous productions/development in
America, and that of the National Theatre’s legacy. In considering theatrical performances,
Carlson considers the semiotics of the theatre building to be as crucial as the semiotics of the
performance in it. In considering *Angels*, we should consider the act of coming to this
particular theatre and the reception of a piece. The physical space of a performance is also
very important. Both the internal space in which performance takes place, as well as the
external space, is given significance. Paul Knowles argues for the recognition that the
performance of a play is one part of a much larger social and cultural event of ‘going to the
theatre.’\(^{276}\) Theatres, and the work they stage, are associated with the particular district in
which they are located; they are, as Carlson outlines, a collective defined by physical
location.\(^{277}\) In the case of the National there is a powerful cultural resonance bound up with
the physical act of attending that theatre.

The physical location of the National, which can be found on the South Bank among
such institutions as the Southbank Centre, British Film Institute and close to the Tate Modern
and Shakespeare’s Globe, deliberately mark it as part of a ‘cultural centre’. As Susan Bennett

\(^{275}\) Carlson, Marvin *The Haunted Stage: the theatre as a memory machine*, Ann Arbor, MI: University of


\(^{277}\) Carlson, Marvin, 2003, p140.
suggests, this collection of theatres is ‘designed to draw attention to itself.’\textsuperscript{278} Architect Denys Lasdun deliberately designed and situated the physical building to merge with the environment over time and make it a part of cultural signifiers\textsuperscript{279}. Although Lasdun’s plans did not quite come to fruition in the manner he wished, the concrete physical exterior of the National remains ‘monumental’ in and of itself - both in the language of design, and also in the sense of it being a ‘monumental theatre’\textsuperscript{280}. The ‘monumental theatre’ as described by Carlson is characterised by a prestigious location, usually holding ‘prominent positions in the urban text.’\textsuperscript{281} This sense of the building’s prominence and ‘monumentalism’, influences audience expectations of its productions and the sense of their importance in the cultural landscape.

In the case of the National, the physical prominence is also associated with what McAuley terms an ‘edifice’ theatre - that is advertising public association with a certain kind of performance.\textsuperscript{282} Although McAuley acknowledges that having a theatre in a certain location is not necessarily a marker of a certain kind of audience or performance expectation, she does reiterate that the location makes some kind of statement about who is expected or encouraged to participate.\textsuperscript{283} For the National Theatre these expectations relate closely to the theatrical landscape of the National, as explored in Chapter 2. The cultural or theatrical expectations of the National Theatre audience/experience combine high calibre, but traditional, values with innovation. The expectations and associations of attending the theatrical event of Angels in these buildings affect the production itself. The National is a prominent building both in its literal construction and its wider socio-cultural implications. The audience, notes Bennett in her study on theatre audiences, prepares emotionally in coming to the theatre in a similar manner to the actors.\textsuperscript{284} These external elements are useful to note when considering the staging of Angels.

\textsuperscript{279} Lewis, 1990, p91.
\textsuperscript{283} McAuley, 1999, p.46.
3.1.2 Production

The venue within the National in which Angels was staged had a significant influence over how the play was presented, as is the space in which it was staged. The Cottesloe, the smallest of the National’s three spaces, holds up to 300 people. The physical space of the Cottesloe creates an intimate environment, both through its size and its separation from the main building. The Cottesloe was designed for small-scale plays and new productions; it has a different remit and identity to the traditional proscenium arch Lyttelton space, or the largest Olivier space. Both of the larger National spaces are designed for grander productions; in their scale, a commercially viable element is also needed for the majority of productions. The Cottesloe, although smallest, is the most flexible of the spaces, with the seating and staging can be reconfigured to almost any design. It is physically distant and thematically distinct from the theatrical space of the National as a whole. Removed from the main building, audiences enter via a side door. This intimacy of space, as well as the audience's proximity to the actors, provides a feeling of security in which to explore new work, alongside the financial security such small audiences offer.

This location serves its purpose of being an area for new, often daring work. To an audience it may feel as though they are ‘discovering’ a separate theatrical space, the physical space along with the productions being ‘niche’. If we take Carlson’s idea of theatres being ‘ghosted’ by artistic and social memories of past performances, then the placement of Angels in the Cottesloe seems appropriate. The Cottesloe denotes Angels as a new and innovative work and as a part of, yet still slightly separate from, the institution that is the National Theatre. The use of the Cottesloe is not surprising for a new work of this kind at the National. As artistic director Nicholas Hytner comments it is ‘bluntly the least demanding on the box office’ He also alludes to a particular audience for the Cottesloe being ‘those who are most interested in the subject’, in contrast to that which is staged in the Olivier which must ‘attract a large proportion of the available audience.’

285 The others being the fan-shaped 1500 capacity Olivier and the 890 seat proscenium arch Lyttelton.
287 Carlson, 2003, p133.
288 Nick Hytner has been artistic director of the National Theatre since 2003, and will step down in 2015; he will be succeeded by Rufus Norris. Hytner, N, The Cottesloe, <www.nationaltheatre.org.uk>, accessed 27th January 2012.
289 Ibid
290 Ibid
The choice of the Cottesloe to stage *Angels* was both practical, in financial terms, and artistic. The number of seats meant a smaller risk in relation to box office revenue. The smaller, intimate, flexible space allowed also for experimentation in the staging and production.\(^{291}\) The practical implications for staging a work such as *Angels* in the Cottesloe also extend to the physical space and the theatrical possibilities it provides as a black box that can be transformed into different seating arrangements, dependant on the needs of the play. For *Angels*, the audience was face on to the performance space, with the fixed seating of either balcony forming a thrust stage space.\(^{292}\) The levels and balcony available to the back of the space alongside the floor trapdoors were also used for the actors to adapt the minimal space into the many scenes needed. \(^{293}\) This staging is intrinsic to understanding the presentation of the ideas in Kushner’s text and therefore transposing this to the British stage.

Kushner indicates clearly, in his introduction to the text, the style in which he expects his play to be produced. In his ‘note about the staging’, Kushner highlights three general points; that the play ‘benefits from a pared down style, with minimal scenery’, that scene changes are ‘rapid and without blackout’, and that it is an ‘actor driven event’.\(^{294}\) This approach lends itself well to the Cottesloe setting with limited space on stage and off. Scenery was kept to a minimum with the furniture needed for each scene brought on by a combination of stagehands and actors. The crucial element of Kushner’s instruction rests on his desire for the realisation of ‘theatrical illusion.’ In keeping with his Brechtian approach to drama, Kushner wishes the moments of magic or fantasy in his text to be clearly theatrical illusion - that is, in his words, that ‘the wires may show’.\(^{295}\) By this, he means that the effects he requests in the text should be ‘fully realised’ and ‘thoroughly amazing’\(^{296}\) but that the audience should also be aware that they are effects. This works well with the intimate space of the Cottesloe, which lacks the scope and technical ability of the National’s Olivier space to create the sweeping spectacle the text would seem to demand without this caveat from Kushner.

\(^{291}\) It is of note that the Cottesloe theatre format in which *Angels* was presented is no longer in existence. The space closed on 23\(^{rd}\) February 2013 and is scheduled to reopen after refurbishment in 2014. It will be renamed the Dorfman theatre. In the interim the National Theatre recreated a temporary smaller space replacing the Cottesloe known as ‘The Shed’.

\(^{292}\) National Theatre Archives, stage blueprints.

\(^{293}\) Stage layout derived from blueprints at the National Theatre archive, as before.


\(^{295}\) Kushner, T *Angels in America, Millennium* 1993, p11.

\(^{296}\) Ibid.
It is notable at this point that the design and look of Angels varied much between the initial productions in London, New York, Los Angeles and San Francisco as noted in reviews by Holly Hill\textsuperscript{297} Clive Barnes\textsuperscript{298} and Michael Billington\textsuperscript{299}. The San Francisco, Los Angeles and New York productions all took place in proscenium arch theatres. The location of the audience in relation to the actors, the space available and layout for staging therefore are all very different in the proscenium arch layout. Nick Ormerod’s design in London was stripped back and minimalistic on the whole. The set itself, based against the back wall of the theatre was dominated by two backdrops, that of an American flag and a large construction of the Hebrew letter aleph,\textsuperscript{300} both of which were incorporated into the action of the play at significant points.\textsuperscript{301} The rest of the stage remained bare until inhabited by actors bringing with them the relevant furniture and props required.\textsuperscript{302} The set was practical and functional rather than ornamental. Michael Billington in his review commented: ‘Ormerod’s design which achieves breath-taking fluidity: scene melts into scene…and the detail feels right, down to the images of Garbo and Bette Davis that decorate the gay lovers’ bedhead.’\textsuperscript{303} This theatrical approach to the depiction of AIDS is a strength of Donnellan’s production, an unrelenting realistic depiction of AIDS would not be possible in the theatre. Instead this more theatrical approach conveys a depiction of AIDS without the need for detail or realism. The balance struck between seeing in close proximity the bodies of characters affected by AIDS and this more metaphoric, theatrical approach confronts the audience with depictions of AIDS while not overloading or alienating an audience with unrelenting medical detail or overtly graphic depictions.

\textsuperscript{297} Hill, Holly \textit{The Advocate}, 24\textsuperscript{th} April, 1994
\textsuperscript{298} Barnes, C, \textit{Angelically Gay about our decay}, New York Post, 5\textsuperscript{th} May 1993
\textsuperscript{299} Billington, M, The Guardian, 22\textsuperscript{nd} November 1993
\textsuperscript{300} Written as א, spelled as אֶלָא and transcribed as Aleph.
\textsuperscript{301} The American flag is split in two at strategic moments of the play; when the Angel arrives (\textit{Millennium} Act 3, Scene 7) Or when Prior arrives in Heaven (\textit{Perestroika}, Act 5, Scene 2). The Aleph is depicted in flames as Prior recounts his encounter with the Angel (\textit{Perestroika}, Act 2, Scene 2). References found in National Theatre Archives Bible copy.
\textsuperscript{302} As noted in Kushner’s instructions and the stage manger’s notes.
\textsuperscript{303} Billington, M Guardian, 25\textsuperscript{th} January 1992.
3.2 Depictions of AIDS in *Angels in America*

The context in which *Angels* was presented is important, both in the history of AIDS (explored in Chapter 2) and in relation to the theatre in which it is performed. The method of transposing of Kushner’s text to Britain also rests on the depictions of AIDS within it. Although the differences in the medical experience of AIDS in America and Britain respectively, had bearing on the transposition of *Angels* to Britain, it is not, as noted previously, considered here in terms of audience reception or knowledge of this. As noted, audience reception is not possible to gauge. Likewise any attempt to assess to what degree an audience would or would not have knowledge of the American medical system. The analysis, as with the productions themselves, focuses on the content as created by Kushner and the directing team. The following sub-sections will explore the depiction of characters with AIDS, the medical depiction of AIDS, the language used to discuss AIDS, as well as the emotional and political connotations of AIDS within *Angels*. These aspects, considered in the context of the British production, and in relation to the specific production decisions, will help to examine the transposition of Kushner’s text.

3.2.1 Characters with AIDS

The characters with AIDS in Kushner’s play are the primary means by which the condition is depicted and discussed, both in the physical depictions on their bodies and the emotional fallout related to their diagnosis. AIDS is primarily depicted through the storylines of two characters Prior and Roy. Prior, the central character in Kushner’s narrative, is an identifiably gay character, and his prominent sexuality is a means of confrontation to the audience. Prior is a ‘WASP ‘American of around 30 years old. The use of Prior as a central character who has contracted AIDS, with his WASP background and privileged middle class existence, follows the mould of previous AIDS dramas. As noted in the introduction, the majority of early AIDS theatre used characters in this demographic, writing white middle class, young or middle aged characters. This reflected the primary demographic of the

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304 WASP; ‘White Anglo Saxon Protestant’ defined by the Oxford Dictionary as: ‘an upper- or middle-class American white Protestant, considered to be a member of the most powerful group in society.’ The term is also defined in the glossary of the National Theatre programme for British audiences who may not be as familiar with the term. National Theatre Programme, 1993/1994. His age and social standing, described as an ‘occasional’ club designer or caterer who ‘lives modestly off a small trust fund, by Kushner, *The Characters, Angels in America*, 1995, np.
playwrights themselves. Kushner’s play, though featuring Belize, an African American character in a prominent role, again deals predominantly with white, middle class gay men.

Kushner does foreground the sexuality of his central characters. The play’s subtitle, *A Gay Fantasia on National Themes*, alludes to the sexuality both of the characters with AIDS and other characters is a central issue. The foregrounding of characters’ sexuality in a play intended for such a prominent stage, both in Britain and America, indicates a strong message from Kushner about the visibility of gay characters. Prior’s sexuality is foregrounded by references to him as a gay man across the text; in an angry tirade at the Angel, Prior declares: ‘I am a gay man I am used to pressure’. Later, in reference to his boyfriend being ‘closeted’, Louis comments ‘I always get so closet-y at these family things’ while Prior good naturedly teases him by saying, ‘Butch you get butch.’ Kushner here is clearly aligning his protagonist with his title declaration of ‘Gay fantasia’: he is clear and open about both his character’s sexuality and presenting sexuality on stage. When staged in Britain, or indeed in America, this was still a relatively new approach. Previously gay characters on stage had been hidden, implicit but indirect, and not sexual beings.

The narrative around Roy Cohn, the other gay main character with AIDS in Kushner’s text, is problematic in some ways when transposing the text to the British stage and advantageous in others. Roy Cohn, as Kushner highlights in his notes, was ‘all too real’: a successful and influential lawyer who died in 1986 from an AIDS related illness. As a significant public figure, Kushner has Roy say in *Perestroika* ‘It’s history. I didn’t write, it though I flatter myself I am a footnote.’ For his role in both the Rosenberg trial and the Army-McCarthy hearings, Cohn is a figure of historical significance. Cohn had a highly successful and influential legal career in New York before being disbarred shortly before his death for misconduct. As Stephen Bottoms notes Cohn ‘never really acquired currency as a

305 Kushner, Millennium, Act 3, Scene 4, 1995, p 123.
307 As outlined in the introduction Kushner draws influence from previous American and British dramatists in depicting Gay characters. A fuller history of Gay characters on stage may be found in Nicholas de Jongh’s *Not in Front of the Audience; homosexuality on stage*, London: Routledge, 1992.
308 Kushner, *T Angels in America*, introduction, np
309 Kushner, *Perestroika*, Act 3 Scene 1, p34
310 The trial of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg which began in 1951 was the only instance in US history of civilians being tried and convicted for espionage. Roy Cohn’s involvement as a prosecutor was integral in securing their conviction. The evidence from his cross-examination of Ethel’s brother-in-law David Greenglass has since been questioned. ‘*False testimony clinched Rosenberg spy trial*’. BBC News. December 6, 2001.
311 The Army-McCarthy hearings took place between April and June 1954 as a result of Senator McCarthy’s ‘witch hunt’ for American Communists. Cohn acted as Chief Counsel for the defence in the hearings.
house-hold word’ however he was a known public figure in American politics. Roy Cohn is no stranger to fictionalisation, appearing in or referenced across popular culture. He also features centrally in a notable theatre piece on AIDS Ron Vawter’s one man performance piece Roy Cohn/Jack Smith, in which Vawter compares the lawyer to performance artist Smith who also died of AIDS. The depiction of Cohn in other performance texts, including Vawters, along with his historical context is explored in detail by Stephen Bottoms. Although well known in America, these fictions - like Cohn himself - would not have been widely known or recognised by British audiences. For British audiences, therefore, there is some distance between the real person and the character on stage. This separation assists in the transposition of Angels allowing audiences to be immersed in the fictional Roy Cohn’s story rather than reconciling this with the real person.

The inclusion of any real character in fiction is problematic. Kushner is clear that the events surrounding Cohn are fictional. The additional issues with depicting Cohn in a play that deals primarily with his sexuality and AIDS diagnosis is outlined in essays by Michael Cadden’s and Atsushi Fujita. In both of these essays the problematic public ‘outing’ or ‘pinklisting’ of figures with AIDS is dealt with. Cadden notes that ‘pinklisting’ is usually as ‘celebratory as it is speculative’; however, he expresses concern that for Cohn, reference to his sexuality as not a part of such ‘community pride’. He also questions the influence and danger of Cohn’s pink listing, making comparisons with blacklisting, a phenomenon, as he notes, Cohn himself was familiar with. In relation to Kushner’s use of Cohn and the depiction of AIDS and characters with AIDS in Britain, there is a real danger of Cadden’s fears being realised and Cohen’s depiction or ‘pinklisting’ taking on different meaning to Kushner’s intention. However, in the context of the British production, this effect is muted.

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313 These include references to Cohn or characterisation in The X Files (Travelers, 1998) to characters based on him in Kurt Vonnegut novels (see in particular Jailbird, 1979).
315 In his playwrights notes Kushner states: ‘DISCLAIMER[sic]: Roy M Cohn, the character is based on the late Roy Cohn (1927-1986), who was all too real; for the most part the acts attributed to the character Roy, such as his illegal conferences with Judge Kaufmann during the trial of Ethel Rosenberg, are to be found in the historical record. But this Roy is a work of dramatic fiction; his words are my invention, and liberties have been taken.’
317 Cadden, in Geis/Kruger p79.
318 Ibid.
somewhat by the limited knowledge of Cohn. Cohn begins to function within the drama as a stand-alone character rather than as Cohn the real life public figure.

The two central characters with AIDS in Kushner’s play actually are able to communicate with the audience more clearly in Britain than they might in America, and become simply two characters with AIDS for the majority of the audience. This does not exclude international visitors who may be oblivious to Cohn entirely, no matter whether watching the play in America or Britain. This also does not preclude American visitors to the National Theatre, or those with a detailed knowledge of the real life historical sources. Just as Kushner cannot presume medical knowledge relating to AIDS, he also cannot presume socio-historical or political knowledge. It is reasonable to postulate that, on the whole, British audiences will be less familiar with the specifics of Cohn’s life than American ones. The audience, then, can focus on the protagonist and antagonistic elements relating to the characters. More importantly focuses on the depiction of AIDS, meaning that this becomes the central issue for the British audience, and Cohn's political and historical context is sidelined. In Britain, Cohn becomes the vessel for Kushner’s depiction of AIDS on stage as a contrast and parallel to Prior, as well as a vehicle for political statement. This does somewhat alter the historical and political implications of Kushner’s work. In transposing the play to Britain the specific cultural associations of Cohn are altered. However, the wider implications, such as his Right Wing policies and homophobia, resonate in both cultures which are alluded to, but not explained in detail within the play, may not resonate as strongly in Britain. However, as noted, such reactions cannot be fully gauged and a production decision was made to include these.

Kushner’s characters are important in the wider theatrical landscape as well as in the landscape of AIDS in performance. In terms of AIDS in performance, Kushner may be criticised for not further pushing the boundaries or spectrum of people affected by AIDS, or indeed of gay people. These characters, although in some ways limited, are changing from the kinds of homosexual identities that Vito Russo criticised in cinema barely a decade earlier.319 Kushner’s gay characters also move away from what Sarah Schulman referred to as the ‘A

list’ or ‘idealised’ gay man that had come to stand in place of any real depiction of gay identities. Nevertheless, Kushner is not in *Angels* diversifying the stereotype image.

### 3.2.2 Depictions of the medical and AIDS

There has been little direct academic analysis of the depiction of AIDS in Kushner’s plays; the focus has mainly been on the filmic adaptation by Laura Beadling. The articles by Beadling and Pearl, focusing on the film version, which by nature of the medium must depict aspects differently to the stage version, compare it to the American stage version – which, as explored across this analysis, again differs to the British version. These articles nevertheless offer insight into Kushner’s depictions of AIDS as translated to screen or transposed to other productions. Overall, critical attention has focused on the political and identity based aspects of Kushner’s play. While the depiction of AIDS is pertinent to such analysis, consideration of how the plays create and represent the physical aspects of AIDS on stage will allow analysis of transposing such depictions to a British audience.

The British experience of AIDS is markedly different to the American and, particularly, to the New York experience. The medical terms associated with AIDS are listed in the programme for *Angels* at the National, though some of these, including ‘KS’, are not Americanisms specifically. Although the term is demographically specific, possibly motivating the producers to include it in the glossary. The difference between the medical systems of the two countries, and therefore the potential difference in audience reactions, is not considered here in terms of the differing audience reactions, which are not calculable, but in terms of the approach of the texts and production decisions. The programme for *Angels* having a glossary is a key element in these production decisions, seeking to highlight some information that may be considered a useful addition to their production. The use of the programme in highlighting or conditioning a semiotic response by an audience is dealt with in detail by Carlson, who notes that theatre programmes offer a means for directors to guide audience responses by use of image and content. In the programme for *Angels*, this

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322 (KS) An abbreviation for ‘Kaposi’s Sarcoma’ a kind of lesion common in early stages of HIV infection.

extensive index of definitions indicates the significance of medical information related to AIDS in Kushner’s play.

By showing the audience a list of terms and definitions deemed necessary for viewing the text, the programme is also instilling the idea that understanding these terms is a purpose of this text. This also raises a question of privileged knowledge within the audience, as those who have bought and read a programme receive additional information to the performance text. This, I would argue, is not especially problematic: audiences will be made up of a variety of levels of knowledge on any given topic. In this case, the AIDS-related additional information will only marginally increase the differences in knowledge already in place within a given audience. The provision of this information does, however, indicate a desire or feeling of obligation - perhaps by the National rather than the creative team itself - to provide information for and to educate the audience further. This can be viewed as a positive element from the point of view of AIDS drama as education. If an audience chooses, the production can educate on a level beyond the text itself. This is a useful tool in furthering the cause of AIDS education, in addition to that experienced by simply watching the play.

Returning to Kushner and Donnellan’s on-stage depiction of AIDS, it is important to recognise, as noted by Sontag, that ‘AIDS’ is not the name of an illness at all but a condition and difficult to depict in words or performance. Accordingly, it requires the use of semiotic markers to be fully communicated to an audience. Again, as Sontag goes on to say, AIDS exists as a ‘seemingly open-ended list of contributing or ‘presenting’ illnesses’. This makes AIDS problematic to depict on stage, and the very depiction, on stage elsewhere has made (as Sontag also notes) AIDS a product of construction. The idea of providing a glossary therefore becomes important: linking written information with the performance of AIDS on stage. The choice of words, as Sontag points out, constructs AIDS for us as a society – or, in this case, an audience. In providing a written record as well as a performed one, the linguistic depiction of AIDS is at once expanded and further mediated. The constructions of AIDS, as presented by writers such as Kushner, had the issue and responsibility of depicting the intangible. This is done through the actor’s bodies in performance, such as showing bodily markers at key points in the play.

325 Sontag, p 113.
326 Ibid.
The characters' diagnosis and treatment, as well as the deterioration of their illness, are presented using both medical and emotional terms in relation to an AIDS diagnosis. The clear use of the characters’ bodies also allows the production to side-step any issue of the differences between the original American contexts of the medical descriptions of AIDS. As the issue of this difference in experience cannot be judged on audience perception, we must look to the production and the decisions made about this difference. In Donnellan’s production, and in Kushner’s choice of approaches, the depiction of AIDS on stage is clear and largely unambiguous. As noted, there are clear moments of medical detail, none of which requires specific American experience of illness or direct experience or understanding of American life. The producers, and Donnellan’s direction do make the assumption that the illness depicted will be understood by audiences regardless of their prior experience, knowledge or nationality.

The first physical encounter with AIDS in the text is Prior revealing a Kaposi’s Sarcoma lesion to tell his boyfriend Louis of his diagnosis saying: ‘KS baby. Lesion number one. Lookit. The wine dark kiss of the Angel of death.’ In this sentence Prior reveals AIDS for the first time both to his lover Louis, and to the audience. The shorthand notation of the KS lesion that Kushner uses is highly effective to those who understand the reference. The physical manifestation of AIDS in the KS lesion also gives a practical illustration by which to show a largely ambiguous condition. The use of KS to ground the illness in Prior, a symptom Kushner returns to frequently across Prior’s reflection on his illness, allows a physical marker to be shown and used by both the characters on stage. AIDS is physically created on stage through various mediums: For example, the semiotic signifier is Prior’s body and dialogue signifiers. In this instance, Kushner’s stage directions state: ‘He removes his jacket, rolls up his sleeve, shows Louis a dark-purple spot on the underside of his arm near the shoulder.’ Donnellan’s direction did not deviate from these instructions. In the intimate setting of the Cottesloe, the marker would have been clear to all in the audience. Donnellan here embracing the theatrical circumstance of staging at the Cottesloe the intimate setting allowing the staging of these markers of illness to be subtle, as they are in close quarters with the audience. In his staging Donnellan recognises the importance of showing the markers of illness through the bodies of the actors, as AIDS itself is an invisible illness he in staging *Angels* uses a variety of means to show the illness on the bodies of those affected. The

328Ibid.
audience sees the markers of KS on Roy's and Prior's bodies throughout the duration of the text, and these increase over time. The markers act as a reminder of the progression of their illness. They are, as Sontag notes, the signs of a 'progressive mutation, decomposition'\(^{329}\) that Kushner depicts the manifestations of AIDS on the bodies of his characters.

Both Roy and Prior are as depicted succumbing to aspects of their illness; the characters demonstrate everything from subtle references to their condition such as Prior's limp or wearing of glasses to more overt signs, including each of them collapsing at different points in the play.\(^ {330}\) The physical depictions are emphasised by medical description such as Prior's; '[m]y lungs are getting tighter. Fever mounts and then you get delirious. And then days of delirium and awful pain and drugs.'\(^{331}\) The description is detailed enough to give a clear picture of the physical toll the illness is taking but vague enough not to distance the audience with medical jargon or alienate those unfamiliar with the specifics of the condition. Kushner has commented; '[i]f you're going to deal with a biological problem you have to deal with the biology.'\(^ {332}\) In confronting the audience with the physical effects on his characters Kushner is doing just this. Angels constructs the biology of AIDS through medical descriptions as above, alongside theatrical devices to create illusion of illness. Kushner's response here echoes Butler's account of the United States' response to AIDS, which was in her words '[p]roduce and vanquish bodies that matter'\(^{333}\) in putting these bodies on stage Kushner is asserting that they do matter. In Angels, the significance of the physical manifestations of AIDS extends beyond the textual depictions or references.

The use of blood has a powerful effect in creating AIDS on stage. This confronts an audience with their fears and possible misconceptions about the disease. Blood is one of the major cultural signifiers of AIDS; and the fear of blood in association with AIDS is a powerful tool in dramatising it\(^{334}\). Blood is used rarely but powerfully in Donnellan’s production of Angels. Blood is seen three times in Angels, twice in relation to AIDS infected bodies. References to blood are repeated frequently in the text from the metaphorical

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\(^{329}\) Sontag, p 127.

\(^{330}\) Prior collapses in Millennium, Act 2, Scene 1, p55. He is described as 'much worse' in the following scene as he is admitted to hospital for the first time. Roy collapses towards the end of Millennium, Act 3 Scene 5, p 112.

\(^{331}\) Kushner, Perestroika, Act 4, Scene 6, p 67


\(^{334}\) Blood is associated with fear around HIV/AIDS due to it being one of the most common means of transmission from person to person.
depiction of the body ‘[p]umping polluted blood’ to the literal reference to ‘[s]hitting blood’. In addition, emotional references are given extra resonance by the reference to blood in this context such as Prior’s comment to Louis when he asks forgiveness for his infidelity ‘I want to see blood.’ These references keep the audience in mind of the power of blood in relation to AIDS. So, while not depicting blood or illness graphically throughout, Kushner subtly reminds an audience of the bodily associations of AIDS and the powerful nature of blood in relation to AIDS.

When Prior first collapses the audience is given a glimpse of blood on him. This was a choice by Donellan in his direction to include an initial signifier of the deeper illness, within a link between the as yet unspoken term AIDS and the condition of his body. This scene opens with Prior lying across the bed with the company assembled upstage of him. The company breathe in unison for fifteen breaths before they push the bed sharply downstage to the centre, Prior falls to the floor panting, his breath matching that of the company. On Louis’s line ‘I’m calling the ambulance’, the company exit and the scene progresses as written in the script. This expansion of Kushner’s written text allows a fuller physical realisation of the depiction of AIDS, but filters it through theatrical devices to avoid a need for realism.

In Act Four Scene Two of Perestroika, the audience is finally confronted graphically with blood. Roy, both succumbing to his illness and the drugs which he is taking, distractedly pulls out his intravenous drip and in his rage at Joe bleeds over him; blood falls from Roy’s hand, covering Joe, Belize and much of the floor. This has several effects, first in creating an almost visceral reaction in an audience during a live theatrical event. The blood shown is literally in front of the audience’s eyes, making its connotations present and more pronounced. The effect is staged realistically, rather than via a symbolic or theatrical approach taken in other aspects of the play. This indicates an awareness of the power of blood in this context. The audience knows the blood is not real; however, being faced with a realistic depiction of blood an audience will still respond and be affected by this powerful signifier.

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335 When Prior talks to himself during his hallucination, Kushner, Millennium Act 1, Scene 7, 1995, p40.
336 Louis to Prior ‘[s]hitting blood sounds bad to me’, Kushner, Millennium Act 1, Scene 7, 1995, p45.
337 Kushner, Perestroika, Act 4, Scene 1, p221.
338 Angels Bible copy, National Theatre Archives, np.
339 Angels Bible copy, National Theatre Archives, np.
340 The blood is contained in a portion of Roy’s IV drip and stopped with wax until the actor pulls the IV off his hand releasing the blood as if he had pulled the needle from his vein. Angels Bible copy, np.
The power of blood as a signifier onstage cannot be underestimated. In any context it is a powerful symbol and in the intimate setting of the Cottesloe the proximity of the audience to the blood is significant. This becomes a significant factor in depicting AIDS through the theatrical form. In such close quarters also Donnellan is able to use blood as a powerful tool. Blood elicits strong responses in people, in some circumstances phobic responses. The closeness to the blood the audience feels in the confines of the Cottesloe has a profound effect – particularly in this instance when spilling from Roy in large quantities and being left on the stage floor. The covering of Joe with the blood marks him on stage for the audience. Belize says what will be in the minds of many of the audience, when he warns him not to touch the blood. The use of blood and its inherent associations amplifies the medical elements depicted and also serves to confront an audience with culturally generated fears about blood in relation to AIDS. This is realised at times, through graphic detail, in Kushner’s text. Donnellan’s staging uses the intimate setting of the Cottesloe theatre to full advantage. The closeness with which the audience experiences the play makes the physical depicters that much stronger, and the resonance more powerful.

3.2.3 Language and AIDS

Discussion of AIDS and use of language can be as powerful as the physical depiction of the disease. Kushner uses language about AIDS to strong effect across the play. The initial encounter with Roy’s illness functions as informative and instructive. Roy’s diagnosis is as explicit as Prior’s is obtuse. Roy is presented with what Prior previously describes as ‘the wall of hard scientific fact.’ Following Prior’s initial revelation at the start of the play, the end of Act 1 sees Roy confronted by his doctor and his diagnosis. The scene opens with a lengthy speech on the nature of AIDS, a neat summary that functions as a guide to the uninitiated in the audience: ‘[t]he body’s immune system ceases to function. Sometimes the body even attacks itself.’ This description is worked in effectively for dramatic purposes. The illustration of Roy’s denial also functions as an opportunity to bring the entire audience together in their knowledge of AIDS.

In writing about 1985 from the point of performance in 1993, Kushner is afforded the benefit of working with a finite amount of knowledge about AIDS; he can effectively present

341 Kushner, Perestroika, Act 4, Scene 1, p221
342 Kushner, Millennium Act 1, Scene 4, 1995, p11.
343 Kushner, Millennium, Act 1, Scene 8, 1995, p 29.
through his characters what was known then, without the fear of presenting work in the present day that runs the risk of being outdated before the first preview, as medical knowledge progresses.\textsuperscript{344} This is significant in terms of the socio-political context of the action of the play but, perhaps, more importantly in terms of the medical depiction. What Kushner presents is a medical historical account of AIDS at a specific point in American history. This works in favour of transposing to British audiences, whose medical understanding would be coloured by British experience. In Britain the epidemic hit later, and with less severity; by the time large numbers were falling ill there was a known cause and developing treatments, unlike the early years in America. The provision of a National Health Service also meant that availability of treatment was far more equitable. Government education campaigns, already mentioned in Chapter Two, meant that by the time \textit{Angels} was staged such explicit ‘educational’ moments were in an audience's mind. Due to \textit{Angels} being set in the past, it is a historical account of AIDS at that point. However this still acts as a means of bringing home the physical aspects as depicted on the bodies of the actors in front of them. Kushner's inclusion of a reference to the early medical trials grounds the play well in its historical context in reference to the early medical trials of the drug AZT.\textsuperscript{345} Using Roy's doctor to explain in his lengthy speech several of the symptoms Roy possesses is a neat and effective means of conveying information about the condition to the audience without the appearance of preaching or teaching.

Also depicting an examination with the nurse Emily, the scene catalogues Prior’s symptoms and the course of his illness and serves dramatically to illustrate Prior’s condition against Louis’ guilt about leaving his lover\textsuperscript{346}. Simultaneously, it allows Kushner to illustrate the physical toll AIDS takes on a person. Belize in his speech to Louis lists this in colloquial terms: '[t]here’s the weight problem and the shit problem and the morale problem.'\textsuperscript{347} Deliberately trying to shock or evoke emotion in Louis within the scene, playing on his guilt for leaving Prior, evokes similar responses of shock and sympathy in the audience.

The medical descriptions function more to develop character understanding and empathy than education of an audience, however. For a British audience, removed in time

\textsuperscript{344}The play is set across 1985/6 with the exception of the Epilogue which is set in February 1990
\textsuperscript{345}Azidothymidine belongs to a group of drugs known as nucleoside reverse transcriptase inhibitors (NRTIs). In 1987 AZT became the first of these drugs to be approved by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration for the purpose of prolonging the lives of AIDS patients, Encyclopaedia Britannica, available: <http://www.britannica.com/azt> Accessed, 7\textsuperscript{th} December, 2012.
\textsuperscript{346}Kushner, \textit{Millennium}, Act 3, Scene 2, 1995, p95.
\textsuperscript{347}Kushner, \textit{Millennium}, Act 3, Scene 3, 1995, p74
and experience from this American experience of AIDS, this dual function of Kushner’s medical cataloguing is useful. The cataloguing is graphic in its detail, allowing an audience perhaps a deeper understanding of the physical effects of AIDS than their previous experience and the physical depictions of the play otherwise allows. This allows the producers to assume that an audience is suitably informed by the content of the play itself regardless of their prior knowledge of AIDS. This applies equally when the play is performed in the American context where producers cannot presume with certainty any detailed knowledge on the part of the audience in relation to the subject matter. Even in the American context there may be socio-cultural elements that mean an audience would not have knowledge of AIDS or the political facets of the play, as much as in the British context. This becomes particularly useful when the play is transposed to Britain where the differences in medical experience of AIDS may be greater even for those with substantial knowledge of the condition. Overall this scene, and others like it, allow Kushner and the director (be it Donellan or any other director) to make the assumption that the play provides the audience with the information they require to comprehend the action and emotion relating to AIDS. In the case of *Angels* as explored here, the style of the play allows for detailed exposition of medical elements which functions by association as educational and informative. A key example of this technique would be the scene showing Prior with the nurse Emily, appraising the progress of his condition:

> Ankle’s are sore and swollen, but the leg’s better. The nausea’s mostly gone with the little orange pills. BM’s pure liquid but not bloody anymore, for now my eye doctor says everything’s ok, for now, my dentist says ‘yuck’ when he sees my fuzzy tongue and now he wears little condoms on his thumb and forefinger. And a mask. 348

The use of ‘condoms’ to describe the dentist’s protective gloves is significant. In this choice of words Kushner aligns the fear of the dentist over infection with the sexual connotations of AIDS. Kushner's use of language to allude to the sexual element (and the sexual protection now needed) is a strong alignment of sexual practice and medical depiction. The overall frank illustration of AIDS and the physical manifestations of AIDS from a sufferer’s point of view produce a powerful picture. This kind of confrontation can aid audiences with what Douglas Crimp calls ‘coming to terms with AIDS’; that is, not only being aware of AIDS but feeling affected.349 The medical depiction is factual and accurate (for the point at which Kushner’s play is set) and avoids sensationalism and scaremongering in depicting AIDS. The medical

facts as given by Roy’s doctor Henry or Prior’s nurse Emily represent what was known at a given point in medical history, and function therefore as both education and historical reminder.

There are elements of difference in the medical aspects of AIDS in Britain surrounding the availability and cost of treatment; and this difference affects how a British audience relates to the play. The healthcare system in America is financially driven, and not state subsidised as in Britain, and so adds another dimension to the performance of illness in America. As Prior notes at one point: ‘I’m sick, I’m sick. It’s expensive.’ before breaking down in tears, thus showing an additional emotional strain of being ill in America. This is in contrast to British experience, where the NHS allows access to healthcare for all. American healthcare is dependent on adequate insurance and ability to pay. Although seemingly separate from the illness itself, the economic facet that Prior alludes to is significant in considering the American experience of illness.

A factor in staging the play is this consideration of the American bias in Kushner’s writing and the relation to the native British healthcare, and so to the experience of AIDS. However, as noted previously, this is not a question of audience reception, which cannot be accurately measured or interpreted, but an action that rests on the assumptions on the part of the producers’. In his writing Kushner works within the assumption that his American audience would be familiar with the aspects that relate to healthcare such as Prior’s comments about cost. Kushner makes the assumption that audiences will either understand this due to their own lived experience of such a system, or a passing knowledge. What Kushner cannot do is account for all possible audience interpretations of the text, or their personal knowledge or ignorance in relation to American healthcare. Based on this, in staging Angels in London the producers make the assumption that audiences will recognise and understand or be unaffected by these differences. The inclusion, in the case of the National Theatre’s production, of the glossary within the programme illustrates the assumption of such differences having some impact on theatre audiences. The degree to which audiences either engaged with such information, or were affected by it cannot be assumed. Likewise, while Angels does discuss elements of the medical that would be perhaps unfamiliar to audiences, the decision to stage it unchanged indicates an assumption from the producers that it was, on the whole, accessible to audiences despite these differences.

350 Kushner, Perestroika, Act 4 Scene 4, p63
Roy’s AIDS treatment, specifically the procurement of experimental drugs that other patients do not yet have access to, also allows Kushner to make direct comment on the social and medical status of people with AIDS in America. Roy secures a supply of AZT medication through his political contacts despite denying his condition. This functions to critique both the medical care system in America and Roy’s abuse of politics. As Art Barroca illustrates, the ‘refusal to care for victims of AIDS reflects a failure of authentic democratic action,’ indicating that the medical responsibility of caring for those with AIDS is also a political responsibility. This approach to the medical and political in Kushner’s text is not the same as that in first generation AIDS plays which were simply raising their voices against the injustice of health care for AIDS victims. Nor is it in keeping with the British experience of AIDS. Roy Cohn and AIDS reflect the flaws in the macrostructure of Reagan-era America which, in turn, fed into the injustice of AIDS treatment. The medical associations and discrepancies between the two countries do not hinder this depiction but add another facet to the text when staged in Britain.

American writers such as Randy Shilts and Douglas Crimp allude to reluctance, motivated by homophobia, to acknowledge or fund work on AIDS at a medical research level that also extends to treatment level. Kushner illustrates this via an exchange between Roy and Belize in which he notes ‘[t]here are maybe thirty people in the whole country who are getting this drug’ continuing ‘[t]here are a hundred thousand people who need it’ illustrating the discrepancy in healthcare. Roy’s response, ‘I am not moved by an unequal distribution of goods on this earth’, reduces healthcare to another economic commodity. That Belize attempts to barter and bribe some from him, eventually stealing the pills, provides further emphasis. This exchange is used by Kushner to illustrate the moralistic element that accompanied AIDS, seen in both America and Britain.

The moralistic element to AIDS in dominant culture, government and press was a theme from early writing. Randy Shilts in And the Band Played On produced one of the earliest responses to this in print and, as outlined earlier, drama and protest movements had likewise been voicing discontent with the dominant cultural moralistic response to AIDS. This was also seen in Britain, in the work of Simon Watney who, in two key texts, explored

351 Barroca, Art Dramaturging the Dialectic, Brecht, Benjamin and Declan Donnellan’s production of Angels in America in Geis and Kruger, p 245.
353 Kushner, Perestroika, Act 3, Scene 1, p 34.
354 Kushner, Perestroika, Act 3 Scene 1, p 34.
these social responses to AIDS from a British perspective. Watney’s work illustrates that the moral panic against which writers such as Kushner were responding was not a uniquely American condition. The language to talk about and around AIDS in Kushner’s work therefore is a response to the wider public discourse in America and beyond. How the play deals with the condition directly in terms of language is also significant.

Kushner uses the term ‘AIDS’ very sparingly in the play and always with direct implication or effect. This first time AIDS is used is by Roy’s doctor, in a discussion that illustrates the power and use of the term when spoken. Henry tells Roy; ‘You have AIDS’ Roy repeats ‘AIDS’ directly back at the doctor followed by: ‘[y]our problem Henry is you are hung up on labels that you believe they mean what they seem to mean’. Roy’s challenge to Henry here allows Kushner to explore the further meaning of the terminology around AIDS. The term itself is, in Roy’s view, as dangerous as the condition. Roy continues, comparing ‘AIDS’ to ‘Homosexual. Gay. Lesbian.’ Although these are words negatively associated with AIDS, Roy explains the actual cultural implications that these are not in fact descriptive terms but identifiers. In Roy’s explanation these are identifiers of; ‘[w]here an individual so identified fits in the food chain.’ He highlights the words that lead to a loss of power: ‘AIDS, Homosexual, Gay, and Lesbian’ and uses AIDS as a counter to this power.

Though Roy’s tirade on AIDS is fuelled with his denial about his condition and internalised homophobia, his reaction allows Kushner to illustrate the power of such labels in relation to AIDS and homosexuality. When Roy says, ‘[h]omosexuals are men who know nobody and nobody knows. Does this sound like me Henry?’ he is highlighting the discrepancy between the label his illness and sexual preferences denote for him and the larger connotations within society as to what these labels mean. In this exploration of language and power, Kushner is highlighting the stigma and isolation suffered in addition to the physical aspects of AIDS. Roy’s denial also illustrates the danger of hiding from these labels, as Henry’s response indicates: ‘you can call it any damn thing you want, Roy, but what it boils down to is very bad news.’ Roy may believe that his denial saves him from losing his coveted ‘clout’ and his powerful place in society, but what it cannot do is save his life. It is a

357 Ibid.
358 ibid.
359 ibid.
360 ibid.
powerful statement by Kushner that the fear of a name or a label influences attitudes and judgements. His statement from Roy challenges audiences to consider their own prejudices.

The discussion Kushner appears to be having about the ownership of, and allegiance with, terms and the implications for a person is shown in Prior’s one use of the term ‘AIDS’ itself. Previously, he describes the condition as the symptoms, and when he talks to the Angels he simply says ‘[t]his disease’. In the Epilogue, however, Prior states: ‘I’ve been living with AIDS for five years.’361 Prior here takes ownership of his condition. His joke ‘that’s six months longer than I lived with Louis’, in light of the linguistic link between gay identity and AIDS, is equally poignant.362 He names his condition and affirms: ‘[w]e won’t die secret deaths anymore.’363 This line shows his labelling of himself via the condition he has; Prior is placing himself by his use of the term ‘AIDS’ in that identity group and unlike Roy, by taking ownership, does not allow it to compromise his identity.

3.2.4 Emotional impact and AIDS

Prior Walter and Roy Cohn form the basis of Kushner’s depictions of AIDS. There is a balance between the characters across the two parts of the play and their use as conveyors of medical information. At no point does either Prior or Roy become simply a vehicle for conveying medical information on AIDS. Their medical condition and the cataloguing of it is balanced with an emotional response to AIDS, which in itself also serves as a mode of communicating and depicting AIDS to the audience.

The audience meets Prior and his boyfriend Louis following the funeral of Louis’s grandmother. They are established as a couple before Prior’s revelation that he has AIDS. The preceding lines are funny and playful, but are undercut with what Louis describes as Prior’s ‘pissy mood’ as they bicker about their missing cat, and Louis’s refusal to introduce Prior to his family.364 The exchange establishes them as a couple, indicates a long standing relationship; they live together and own a pet, and Prior is attending the funeral with Louis. After Prior reveals his diagnosis the playful dialogue is replaced by vehement anger from Louis; ‘[f]uck you fuck you fuck you’ and biting sarcasm from Prior: ‘[w]ell that’s what I like

361 Kushner, Perestroika Epilogue, p 280.
362 Perestroika, Epilogue, p280.
363 Ibid
364 Louis says ‘Sorry I didn’t introduce you, I always get so closenity at these family things’ Kushner, Millennium Act 1, Scene 4, 1995, p 25.
to see, a mature reaction.\textsuperscript{365} This is a contrast in dialogue from the sweet playfulness of the preceding lines, where their relationship is established. The scene illustrates a clear shift in their relationship caused by the intrusion of AIDS.

Their relationship is immediately undercut and compromised by the revelation of Prior’s AIDS diagnosis. Louis’s immediate reaction is that of panic, holding Prior’s arm tightly and embracing him fiercely, while Prior retains the sarcastic demeanour, used as a defence, saying: ‘I’m a lesionnaire. The Foreign Lesion. The American Lesion. Legionnaire’s disease […] my troubles are lesion.’\textsuperscript{366} Prior goes on to declare: ‘I’m going to die.’

The emotional impact of AIDS, over the physical and medical fears Prior may have, is revealed in the next exchange:

\begin{quote}
Louis: When did you find this?
Prior: I couldn’t tell you.
Louis: Why?
Prior: I was scared Lou
Louis: Of what?
Prior: That you’ll leave me\textsuperscript{367}
\end{quote}

Prior’s biggest fear relating to his diagnosis is that he will be facing it alone. He hides it from Louis because he fears this will mean the end of their relationship. Here Kushner is clearly illustrating that the AIDS went far beyond the physical symptoms and that emotional impact was equally, if not more, resonant than the physical implications for those diagnosed. The scene ends with Louis leaving to bury his grandmother and a desperate request from Prior: ‘[t]hen you’ll come home.’\textsuperscript{368} His fears about AIDS are expressed through the effect emotionally it will have on his relationship.

The fear that Prior expressed in revealing his illness to Louis is quickly revealed to be well founded. Prior’s description of his symptoms a little later in the play - that include ‘two new lesions’ and ‘there’s protein in my urine’\textsuperscript{369} - are showing an escalation in his illness. In addition, his earlier fears about Louis leaving him due to his condition reveal themselves to be well founded when Louis shows his insecurities with his partner being ill, asking ‘What if I walked out on this would you hate me forever?’\textsuperscript{370} Prior, in a simple but emotionally revealing declaration about his reliance on his partner during his illness responds simply,
This scene illustrates clearly the close relationship between the physical symptoms and the emotional impact of AIDS. It also furthers Prior’s AIDS narrative, showing the evolving effects his illness has on his life in both physical and emotional sense.

The need for Prior to have an emotional connection, a support system for his illness is illustrated in his continued longing for Louis at times of difficulty related to AIDS. He tells Belize soon after Louis leaves saying ‘I want my fucking boyfriend.’ It is significant that the most important thing to Prior as AIDS grips him is Louis and his longing for him. As he says:

‘There’s a plague half my friends are dead and I’m only thirty-one, and every goddamn morning I wake up and I think Louis is next to me and it takes me long minutes to remember…’

Through Prior’s longing for Louis, Kushner illustrates the importance of relationships in the AIDS crisis, and the emotional effects of illness. Through this he makes a statement on the element of community through the various networks of relationships. Louis’s reaction is in itself a powerful depiction of the emotional impact of AIDS. His honesty talking to the Rabbi at the start of Millennium shows this: ‘Maybe vomit…and sores and disease…really frighten him, maybe…he isn’t so good with death.’ Here, Louis also effectively conveys the link between the physical and emotional effects by talking about himself in the third person which functions as a distancing technique from his circumstance, while also reflecting his shame at his (currently potential) actions. As Louis goes on, ‘I am afraid of the crimes I may commit’, he indicates the emotional crimes of infidelity and abandonment he does indeed go on to commit against Prior while he is ill. While Prior expresses fear about what will happen to him, Louis is afraid of his inability to cope with what AIDS will do to his lover.

The relationship between Louis and Prior, and the questions of morality and obligation it throws up, has a powerful effect in the depiction of AIDS. It asks questions and challenges an audience rather than simply depicting supportive lovers and families weeping at bedsides. Kushner did not want an audience to come in, cry, feel vilified and leave. Rather, he wanted to challenge them. In emphasising this emotional facet alongside the medical

371 Ibid
373 Kushner Perestroika, Act 2, Scene 1, 1995, p181.
374 Kushner, Millennium, Act 1, Scene 5, 1995, p15.
375 Ibid
and political Kushner’s play is more smoothly transposed to the British stage via a universal appeal to empathy.

It does not matter whether the audience is gay or straight, British or American, the responsibility and strain of caring for a loved one with serious illness is one most audience members could empathise with. But although the themes are universal, there is emphasis on the community in particular in Kushner’s work. Kushner says of his play: ‘The question I am trying to ask is how broad a community’s reach is? How wide does it reach?’ Kushner’s question of community revolves around the care of those with AIDS. Kushner was inspired by an observation he made as a young man in New York in the 1980s. This was that there was a group of young men who, in his words, are ‘not terribly good at taking care of other people at the best of times - who were being asked to look after people who were catastrophically ill’. As Prior says to Louis, ‘There are thousands of gay men in New York City and nearly every one of them is being taken care of’. Kushner laments the nature of AIDS dramas in which ‘people magically went from being disco bunnies to Florence Nightingale.’ Kushner’s point is that Louis, in leaving Prior during his illness, behaves in a manner contrary to the depiction of the loyal boyfriend of previous drama. Louis’s reaction to Prior’s illness is a reflection of what was going unsaid, that what was unspeakable was that not all gay men were responding well to caring for their partners or friends in the wake of AIDS.

In order to show that caring for people with AIDS was not straightforward, Kushner uses Belize’s encounter and caring for Roy Cohn. This is in a professional capacity and is a difficult relationship for both. Belize is at first flippant upon meeting Cohn, saying to Prior on the phone, ‘Fetch me the hammer and the pointy stake girl. I’m a-going in.’ Belize then establishes the power he has over Roy as his nurse, starting by saying:

Now I’ve been doing drips a long time. I can slip this in so easy you’ll think you were born with it. Or I can make it feel like I just hooked you up to a bag of liquid Drano. So you be nice to me or you’re going to be one sorry asshole come morning.

Their relationship belies the myth of solidarity or a need to care for another simply because they share a sexual orientation. For Belize, Roy’s personality and his actions in life elicit no

379 Kushner, Perestroika Act 4, Scene 1, 1995, p220.
381 Kushner, Perestroika, Act 1, Scene 5, 1995, p56.
382 Kushner, Perestroika, Act 1, Scene 5, 1995 p157.
solidarity or sympathy on initial meeting, not to mention the racism and homophobia Roy also directs at Belize. An audience is led, by Kushner, to question if this is not an extension of the shared community responsibility idea when Belize mentions ‘He’s [Roy’s doctor] not Queer, I am’ as an explanation to why Roy should trust him. It is his sexuality rather than his vocation that gives him authority in this situation. In this line, Belize also reclaims the term ‘Queer’ thrown at him by Roy as a homophobic taunt. In so doing, he is indicating the power of queer people in fighting AIDS due to their first-hand experience or proximity to the epidemic. Belize is readdressing the balance of power; Roy sees homosexuality as synonymous with a loss of power yet in this situation Belize, as a gay man, holds more power. This draws attention to the significance of sexuality and medical treatment from a different angle; those like Belize who understood the challenges of AIDS were in a stronger position to fight.

The questions raised around the responsibility of the community in relation to AIDS as elicited by Roy’s death are perhaps the most interesting AIDS-related moments Kushner presents. Roy dies finally succumbing to his illness despite the advanced medication and hospital care he is given. In an attempt to act out forgiveness in relation to Roy after his death, Belize asks Louis to recite the Kaddish, the Jewish prayer for the dead. The idea is repugnant to Louis, vehemently refusing ‘no fucking way I’m praying for him’, citing his parents' reaction if they found out:

My New Deal pinko parents in Schenectady would never forgive me, they’re already so disappointed; he’s a fag. He’s an office temp. And now look his’ saying Kaddish for Roy Cohn.

Louis’s somewhat glib response belies Kushner’s discomfort with offering too much in the way of absolution for Cohn. However, Belize’s response to Louis’s disgust simply and effectively puts the case for the treatment of Cohn: he replies, ‘Louis, I’d even pray for you’. By setting apart Cohn’s actions in life in favour of the difficult death he just had, Belize argues strongly for an equal treatment. Belize then turns the argument back on himself and Louis by declaring that: ‘It doesn’t count if it’s easy. It’s the hardest thing forgiveness. Which is maybe where love and justice finally meet.’ By showing the forgiveness, or at least the attempts to forgive Cohn, who was previously described by Louis as ‘The most evil

383 Ibid.
384 Ibid. Act Five Scene three, p81.
385 Kushner, Perestroika Act 5 Scene 3, p82.
386 Ibid.
vicious bastard ever to snort coke at Studio 54’ Kushner shows several things.\textsuperscript{387} Firstly that Louis has grown, and moved beyond his blindsided political views of earlier in the play, to consider Roy as a person rather than a political idea. In reciting the Kaddish, Louis demonstrates not quite empathy, but a shared experience, that of AIDS taking over their lives. Secondly in terms of the character of Roy: if he can be given some kind of absolution for what he suffered, Kushner seems to ask here how anyone else can be blamed.

It is this aspect, the impact on the characters, which generates a fuller picture of the effects of AIDS. It allows the questions AIDS raises to be turned around to the audience, who are now engaged both with the characters and with AIDS. Louis’s question ‘[w]hat if I walked out on this?’\textsuperscript{388} is also directed at the audience. The uniting of the physical and personal allows Kushner’s text to transcend the nationality of the play and the demographic groups represented. Kushner hopes that ‘you take the world you see into the real world if it moved you.’\textsuperscript{389} In balancing the emotional involvement with his characters alongside the medical depictions, both literal and metaphoric work together in Kushner’s depiction of AIDS.

\textsuperscript{387}Kushner, \textit{Perestroika}, Act 4, Scene 8, p73.
\textsuperscript{388}Kushner, \textit{Millennium}, Act 1, Scene 8, 1995, p46.
3.2.5 Sexuality and AIDS

As illustrated, the depiction of AIDS is both physical and emotional. The most significant element of this is that Kushner’s characters are sexual beings. The use of sex and sexuality in *Angels* is described by Nicholas deJongh as ‘an acute departure from those modes of theatre writing in which British dramatists have dealt with crises and problems in which any sort of sexual desire is implicated’. deJongh uses a model based around a 1924 dispute to outline the precedent of censorship on the British stage. The depiction of sex on the British stage is, as deJongh pointed out in 1997, was still a rare occurrence and one that remains marred by the residues of the Lord Chamberlain’s censorship. To depict sex in any form, and particularly to show graphic depictions of gay sex in a play that also addresses AIDS is a powerful statement in Britain, which has only relatively recently been free from censorship. In 1958 the Lord Chamberlain first relaxed the absolute veto on homosexuality on stage in Britain.

Plays in London were not quick to take up the new relative freedom. This was in part due to the Lord Chamberlain’s prevailing theatrical powers until the Theatres Act of 1968 was passed. As a result, deJongh argues that what was presented in terms of homosexuality on stage in the 1960s was ‘only a moderated refinement of traditional views’. Twenty years after the repeal of theatre censorship in 1968 - a relatively short time in theatrical terms - Section 28 of the Local Government Act acted as a new form of censorship, just as the AIDS epidemic was driving gay men to use theatre as an outlet and tool for campaigning and education, and as an expression of enduring sexuality. Section 28 actively and publicly discouraged homosexuality being depicted in sexual terms, whether directly or indirectly, and as a result of its prevailing influence on culture, even the more innocent physical expressions of homosexual sexuality were problematic at this time. John Clum argues that ‘what is

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392 The Theatre’s Act 1968 covered several areas of legislation. Most significantly it repealed the 1943 Censorship act thereby revoking the Lord Chamberlain’s powers of theatre censorship. Full details of the act may be found at <www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1968/54> accessed, 12th November, 2013.
394 Section 28 of the Local Government Act 1998 stated that, ”shall not intentionally promote homosexuality or publish material with the intention of promoting homosexuality” or ”promote the teaching in any maintained school of the acceptability of homosexuality as a pretended family relationship” <www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1988/9>, accessed, 13th November 2013. The contents of the website, though aimed at Schools, the confusion around the scope of such legislation led councils to be cautious in all areas relating to homosexuality.
395 In 1991 a BBC documentary *A Kiss Is Not a Kiss* noted the controversy of a subtle gay kiss on *Eastenders*, quoted in deJongh, p189.
‘seen’ in gay drama can be frighteningly erotic or erotically frightening to some members of the audience.” In *Angels* an audience is presented with inherently sexualised and, at times, graphic depictions of gay sexuality. This, it is argued here, was challenging to audiences, important to the depiction of gay men in relation to AIDS and significant to the British theatrical landscape. Although far more open than its predecessors, the shadow of AIDS must have influence upon sexual expression across the text through the depictions outlined here, and the open nature of its character’s sexuality. The audacity of the subtitle ‘a gay fantasia’ acts as a declaration of the intent to be honest and open with sexual identity and portrayal, something which Donnellan’s production highlights.

There is an echo to the influence of Tennessee Williams in Kushner’s depiction of sexuality. Williams was ahead of many of his contemporaries in depicting sexuality more broadly, more overtly and specifically homosexuality, on stage. He was, necessarily, more obtuse in his depictions that Kushner places at the centre of his work. James Fisher notes that although there was a shift in depictions of Gay men on stage following the AIDS epidemic, that there was ‘no gay dramatist who seems to follow directly from Williams’. Kushner is, after Williams the only American playwright who deals with sexuality centrally in his work. The influence of Williams on Kushner as a playwright, and *Angels*, specifically the elements of sexuality depicted on stage, is clear.

Prior and Louis’s relationship could have become desexualised by Prior’s AIDS diagnosis, through Louis’s fear of infection. The ideas of desexualisation that the wider media and government campaigns propagated, alongside the homophobic responses of this kind, meant those with AIDS were supposed to become desexualised. Kushner’s play, under Donnellan’s direction, counters this with Prior passionately kissing Louis moments before revealing his lesion to him. In Donnellan’s direction, this was described as ‘Suddenly Prior kisses Louis savagely on the lips’. This element was not written into Kushner’s stage directions which for this scene are gentle, non-sexual touches between the characters. By having Prior kiss Louis before revealing his KS lesion, and so his AIDS diagnosis, Donnellan

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398 Ibid.
401 Kushner in this scene includes directions for a hug between Prior and Louis and Louis holding Prior’s arm. These are caring, loving touches but lack the sexuality of Donnellan’s direction.
in this scene makes a sexual parallel with AIDS, perhaps seeking to underline or therefore subvert audience expectations. In making the sexual implications of their relationship manifest before revealing Prior’s condition these links are highlighted in the scene. Through his direction Donnellan goes on to reverse this with a desexualised relationship between Prior and Louis for the rest of the play. They embrace, they kiss and they even dance but we do not see them have sex. Kushner presents clearly a couple, one of whom has AIDS, who are sexual beings whose sexuality has halted in the face of AIDS.

In 1993, during an interview with Patrick R Pacheco, Kushner considered the implications and limitations on gay men sexually. Kushner concluded that he was not going to let a health issue dictate sexuality, adding, ‘I’d also like not to spend the rest of my life not doing anything.’ These issues are also echoed by leading gay columnist Richard Goldstein who said in 1983:

For many gay men, sex, that most powerful implement of attachment and arousal is also an agent of communion, replacing an often hostile family and even shaping politics…straight people have no comparable experience. In an echo of this scene, in Perestroika Joe and Louis’s sexuality becomes overt in their own kisses which are repeated with intersecting dialogue that includes Joe’s hesitation: ‘Your uh boyfriend. He’s sick.’ These exchanges illustrate the shadow of AIDS and the reality of illness over the physical expression of sexuality. However, in this case, the sexual desire overcomes the concern of AIDS and the scene ends with them having sex.

The moral association with AIDS and sexuality are depicted clearly here with Louis’s infidelity. This reflects Goldstein again, who said: ‘[f]idelity can never be regarded as a measure of commitment when it is inspired by the threat of illness; celibacy as an alternative to death is a painful, numbing choice.’ The added associations of infidelity in the face of AIDS are made clear by Louis’s actions. Louis expresses guilt about Prior’s illness in relation to sexuality: ‘I fucked around a lot more than he did, no justice.’ His use of ‘fucked’ indicates casual sex outside of a relationship, and projects the kind of negative cultural associations of AIDS and both casual sex and homosexuality onto his own

404 Kushner, Perestroika, Act 1, Scene 6, 1995. p162.
experience. This relates to Sontag’s analysis of the moral element of illness, particularly one associated so closely with sex and sexuality. 407 Likewise Joe expresses fear related to sexual expression: ‘[i]n what we’ve been doing maybe I’m even infected’, and so illustrates a moral, political and emotional tie to these physical expressions that are presented to the audience on stage. For a British audience viewing Angels at this time, these expressions of concern for sexual practice that Joe and Louis exhibit echoes the government health campaigns outlined in Chapter 2, where people were urged to curb their sexual practice to protect themselves from AIDS.

Despite this, there is defiance in Kushner’s works, saying that life and sex can and must continue; something that again British audiences, particularly gay men feeling chastised by government education campaigns, might have welcomed. Linked Williams’ work, Kushner here builds on the issue of hidden sexuality and bringing this into the open via the stage depictions. While in Williams’ era characters’ sexuality was by necessity still hidden, the issue of AIDS forces the discussion of sexuality both into centre stage in terms of plays dealing openly with the issues, and in terms of characters dealing with the consequences of their sexuality in the age of AIDS.

The affair between Joe and Louis (however morally questionable in other areas) does send a clear message that sex can continue. As Louis graphically explains, ‘[w]e can cap anything that leaks…sage chemical sex, messy not dirty.’ 409 Louis and Joe do not have sex on stage but the audience is left in no doubt of the sexual nature of their relationship in the scenes they share. At the end of Millennium they kiss as per Kushner’s stage directions and the setting and dialogue implying they are going to have sex. 410 In Perestroika, when they are next seen together, the scene is overtly sexual. Louis smells, kisses and licks Joe who is at first reluctant but then responds. The scene ends with an overtly sexual gesture, as outlined by Kushner’s stage directions: Louis slips his hand down the front of Joe’s pants. They embrace more tightly. Louis pull his hand out, smells and tastes his fingers and then holds

408 Kushner, Perestroika, Act 3, Scene 4, p202.
409 Kushner, Perestroika, Act 1, Scene 6, p163.
411 Joe and Louis meet in Central Park, a known cruising spot for gay men. It’s implied by Louis’ dialogue of ‘come home with me’ and ‘strange bedfellows’ what his intentions are. Kushner, Millennium, Act 3, Scene 7, 1995, p123.
412 Kushner’s stage directions here read: Louis kisses Joe, who holds back a moment and then responds. Perestroika, Act 1, Scene 6, 1995, p 164.
them for Joe to smell. This is a provocative gesture both for the characters and the audience watching. These scenes allow director Donnellan, using Kushner’s writing, to confront an audience explicitly with gay sexuality.

The most overt instance of sexual expression is the scene where Louis has sex with the man in Central Park. The scene has been highlighted by several reviewers as shocking and explicit. Audiences are forced to, through overt depiction of the sex act, confront gay sexuality. The staging and language leaves little to the imagination. The exchange between the men is direct, blunt and aggressive:

MAN: What do you want?
LOUIS: I want you to fuck me, hurt me, make me bleed.

The anonymity of the man means he can create recognition in some of the audience, gay men who may have encountered or been that man in other situations. The connotations of the line ‘make me bleed’ links the relationship between sex and AIDS carried in bodily fluid, and reminds an audience of the potentially deadly associations of this sexual encounter. The encounter therefore becomes illicit not only in its connotations of adultery but also because the audience is reminded of the inherent danger to health now presented by sexual encounters. Kushner again reminds the audience of the deeper implications of the act, the potential threat to life that Louis’s actions now may cause as he has Louis say ‘[i]nfect me don’t care.’ This contrasts with the previous humour and imbues the scene with a wider resonance beyond Louis’s emotional reaction to Prior’s AIDS diagnosis and the betrayal this signifies.

The nature of this sexual encounter is staged both literally in the open in the context of the play, and openly in front of the audience in performance. This encounter is explicit and actually intentionally conforms to media and cultural stereotypes about gay male sexual encounters. It shows the kind of encounter that is frequently used as an example of the negative aspects of homosexuality, acknowledging rather than attempting to deny such behaviour, but it also contextualises it through an understanding of Louis and the events that led him to this act. It is also imbued with a sense of humour:

413 Perestroika, Act 1, Scene 6, p 165.
414 Charles Spencer of The Telegraph described reviewers being ‘Green about the gills’ in his review, a response Nicholas deJongh’s essay on Angels in America draws on. Spencer, C The Telegraph, quoted in DeJongh, N Representing Sex on the British Stage, the importance of Angels in America in Geis and Kruger, p 262.
416 Ibid.
MAN: Relax
LOUIS: Not a chance.\footnote{Ibid.}

This subtle humour, amidst the somewhat graphic and potentially shocking scene mediates the potential for alienation, added to when the Man reveals they cannot go to his apartment as he lives with his mother.\footnote{Ibid.} The inclusion of these humorous elements, although related to the sexual act, distract from it somewhat. This allows a connection to be forged during the scene, outside of the potentially estranging element of the graphic sex scene.

Donnellan’s staging of this, which had the actors standing on opposite sides of the stage, miming the encounter while a scene with Joe and Roy intercut their own, is both provocative and effective. In this instance the staging adds power to Kushner’s writing and enhances the connection an audience makes with the scene, and therefore the connection to the wider aspects of Kushner’s play. The staging of this scene is a deliberate sexual confrontation. In Kushner’s writing the directions are left open giving simple directions like: ‘\textit{They begin to fuck}’ and ‘\textit{The Man pulls out}’. In Donnellan’s staging this becomes detailed and graphic. The scene is intricately choreographed, Louis and the Man mirroring one another in lighting cigarettes, and eyeing one another across the stage.\footnote{Angels in America, Bible copy, Act 3 scene 4, np.} Moving forward to their sexual act, Donnellan’s direction is specific:

\begin{quote}
Slowly deliberately the man unbuttons his leather jeans. When his flies are open he pulls out his penis and testes and presents them to Louis...cupping his palm for Louis to spit into. Louis does. The man massages the saliva into his penis and into the cleavage of Louis’ bottom.\footnote{Angels in America, Bible copy, Act 3 scene 4, np.}
\end{quote}

Both of these examples illustrate the graphic approach that Donnellan took to the depiction of Kushner’s sex scene. He endeavours towards a theatrical realism: though the scene is stylised and mimed, the actions and reactions are real. Donnellan is also fastidious in his direction, dictating teeth being gritted and number of thrusts made.\footnote{The stage directions indicate The reaction, now a whimper. Louis grits his teeth, the man now thrust three times in slow measure rhythm, he then thrusts more urgently seven times to complete the ‘copulation’ just before orgasm he stops. Angels in America, Bible copy, Act 3 scene 4, np.} This direction is a deliberate choice: rather than a simple allusion to sex, there is a detailed and graphic confrontation with the audience in an intimate theatrical space. The audience are forced literally to face one of
the demonised elements associated with AIDS, gay male sexual expression. Donnellan in his direction ensures it is a potent and direct confrontation.

Donnellan constructs a scene that is at once both highly theatrical and realistic enough to disturb reviewers – and, it is assumed, some audience members. The effect of this act can be attributed to the intimacy of the theatrical event; it may also be viewed in light of Herbert Blau’s comment that ‘[t]he erotic capacity of the theatre is not of secondary importance. It is right there in the bodies.’422 In Donnellan’s direction the audience becomes intimately acquainted with these bodies. The erotic acts are graphic in their depiction, though simulated, and, in the intimate space, up close to the audience. John Clum highlights how prior to the AIDS crisis, gay drama had used the naked male body extensively as ‘shock value for part of the audience as it provided titillation for the gay clientele.’423 The discomfort in Angels comes out of a confrontation with sexuality and with its associations with AIDS. Kushner and Donnellan do in this scene what many other writers dealing with AIDS shied away from, with the use of realistic, but theatrically presented, sex. Gay sex had by this point been so demonised in the face of AIDS that it was becoming (if possible) more alienated from so called 'normality'; more demonised than at any other point in history. In presenting it in minute detail, Donnellan challenges the audience to look at what was happening in order to understand it before making judgement. The use of sexuality in the play is highly significant in confronting the audience with AIDS and the reality of related sexual implications. It is also, as argued out by deJongh, significant in terms of British theatrical production.424 For deJongh Angels represents a departure in theatrical representation of sex for British theatre. deJongh cites the censorship that was enacted on British theatre until 1968, and a reticence from British playwrights to address sex openly in their texts. DeJongh highlights that Angels represents a departure from previous modes of theatre writing which dealt with sexual desire of both heterosexual and homosexual variety.425 In this reading, the direct address to, and depiction of sex and sexuality that Kushner depicts was an influential and important moment in London theatre and the theatrical landscape.

423 Clum, John, Still Acting Gay Male Homosexuality in Modern Drama, St Martin’s Griffin, New York, 2000, p 23.
424 DeJongh, Representing Sex on the British Stage: The importance of Angels in America in Geis/Kruger, 1997, p261-270.
Kushner and Donnellan’s depictions of the sexual body and AIDS do not just function to shock an audience, nor are they a simple juxtaposition with the horrors and death associated with AIDS. As illustrated, they are used in conjunction with Kushner’s dialogue and with his storytelling to form a much larger picture. As another reviewer comments: ‘[t]he sight of a man’s sexual organ on stage can be disconcerting, but no more than the revelation of what he may be thinking or feeling when he is using it.’ 426 James Peter is here outlining that it is the characters behind these actions who hold the power in the text. Explicit depictions of sex or disease alone are not enough to convey a message to an audience. It is important that we do not disengage from Kushner and Donnellan’s explicit depiction of both, which is testament to the fact there is far more going on than simply shock value. As Peter goes on, ‘[e]xplicit evil, explicit cruelty are every bit as disturbing as explicit sex hetero or homo’ illustrating that the use of sexuality for both Kushner and Donnellan is used in a wider context than simply positing shocking or explicit material. 427 Feeding into the central concern of community and the impact of AIDS upon it, sexuality becomes a tool in this expression. In presenting both of these aspects to a British audience Kushner was working on groundwork already laid by previous British playwrights, to expand the depiction of gay men as sexual beings as part of a more rounded illustration of them on stage.

427 Ibid.
3.2.6 Politics and AIDS

This section will explore in detail those political elements which relate to the depiction of AIDS in *Angels*. Kushner combines the emotional element of the AIDS narrative in *Angels* with a political element. The political facet of *Angels* is potentially the most problematic element of the play when staged in Britain; it is a text which deals heavily in American politics, specifically Kushner’s critique of Reaganite America, and for a British audience not well versed in the nuances of American politics, these facets may become alienating. However, the similarities between the conservative politics of both Britain and America at this time and the so-called ‘special relationship’ between Britain and America meant that a cursory awareness of American politics was likely for some audience members.

It is argued that the wider political philosophy Kushner discusses is easily transposed to a British viewing. The political elements of the play are substantial, woven into the narrative by Kushner to give his play a clear political edge. This reflects the fact, as Dennis Altman notes, that unlike other diseases and illnesses which we are not used to considering as political, AIDS has had overt political relevance since the beginning. In aligning a wider political discussion and philosophy with AIDS, Kushner ensures his audience is aware of this. Kramer prescribed in his work that activist theatre should, to challenge misconceptions about AIDS, give it a human face and motivate people to action, and Kushner does this. Kushner depicts his politics differently to Kramer, as will be explored further, but he nevertheless offers several political challenges and tracts through his text. Not all of Kushner’s politics in the play is related directly to AIDS; David Savran explores this in some detail when he examines how *Angels* seeks a reconstruction of America through the political. Savran draws on a reading of Walter Benjamin and sees Kushner’s politics as offering a broader, more philosophical approach.

Kushner also discusses gay politics and the politics of AIDS across the play. For Kushner, according to Fisher, ‘the AIDS epidemic had, in essence, pushed gay dramatists towards a more politicized view whether they liked it or not.’ Earlier works such as *The Normal Heart*, as noted in Chapter 2, had an activist political view; Kushner evolves this into a message for the government and wider political culture. Kushner’s theatrical approach here differs from Williams’. In Williams although homosexual characters can be read with some

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429 Kramer Larry, Reports from the Holocaust p14
political agency in their presence on stage, they were not written as centrally political. Kushner, as Fisher notes, is a dramatist with ‘a strongly political sensibility’⁴³¹. Kushner’s politics cover a spectrum of political references, politicised sexuality and a theatrical political approach that owes its influence to Brecht. In particular the Brechtian can be seen in his use of the Angels as vehicles for the political. The more direct political references and comments are considered in light of their performance in the London production before considering the Brechtian Epic aspects, and the role of the Angels as a theatrical device, and the depiction of AIDS.

There are references to the influence of Reagan’s political approach which are fairly self-explanatory, within a general understanding of the right-wing conservative approach to politics. In this case, the specifics of the political approach seen in Reagan’s administration are less important than the left-wing liberal stance Kushner is establishing. References such as Louis’ teasing, flirtatious first meeting with Joe illustrate this:

Joe: Oh that’s unfair.
Joe: I voted for Reagan.
Louis: You did?
Joe: Twice.
Louis: Twice? Well, oh boy. A gay Republican!⁴³²

This functions as a device as to establish Joe and Louis’s opposing politics as well as their flirtation. In the broader sense, the exchange functions as an indicator of Kushner’s political stance. For a British audience, this exchange is in fact useful and accessible. Although the intricacies of American politics may have then be alien to the average British theatre audience member, the general principles of right- and left-wing politics are familiar. Kushner’s jokes about Republicans, and later the more brutal tirades and distance, mirror the familiar British jokes and commentary about ‘Tories’.⁴³³ The close relationship during this time between

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⁴³² Kushner, Millennium, Act 1, Scene 6, 1995, p35.
⁴³³ ‘Tories’ being a nickname for the Conservative Party in Britain. Usually seen as the equivalent to the Republicans in America, the Conservatives are a Right wing party with conservative values.
Thatcherite Britain and Reaganite America also make the complaints of Kushner’s left wing politics familiar to audience members in Britain.

Louis and Roy are the most actively political characters in the play and help Kushner show his political leanings. He further aligns AIDS with politics through Cohn’s character. Kushner places Cohn as a closeted, homophobic, homosexual against the community in which Prior exists. Cohn is an irreconcilable contradiction; his inability to accept homosexuality and power dismantled by his condition. As Kushner notes, and was intrigued by, ‘AIDS is what finally outed Roy Cohn’ Roy's reaction to his condition is political: ‘No, Henry no, AIDS is what homosexuals have.’ The naming of AIDS as the condition he has becomes an issue not of the disease itself but its implications. ‘Roy Cohn’ is synonymous with power in 1980s New York, but ‘AIDS’ is synonymous with those without power - without ‘clout’. As Roy says: ‘Homosexuals are men who in fifteen years of trying cannot get a pissante anti-discrimination bill through City Council. Homosexuals are men who nobody and who nobody knows’ Roy’s disavowal of his gayness is simultaneously a disavowal of his identity of a person with AIDS, which echoes social prejudice, as explored previously. As Bottoms comments, ‘Kushner depicts a Roy who has fought hard to compensate for the powerlessness that the existing social ethos would normally ascribe to a ‘queer Kike’ Roy internalises these prejudices and distances himself from this identity by exhibiting his own prejudice. Roy’s relationship to AIDS and to discourses of power has been considered earlier in this chapter; his stance on his illness and his sexuality is clearly political and allows Kushner to talk politically about AIDS.

Louis also allows Kushner to talk about politics directly, in a similar manner to Roy, as he displays his political views equally clearly; though in Louis’s case his political slant appears less directly related to AIDS. However, the political angle he brings to Angels does have bearing on its role as an AIDS text. Louis’s tirade leads him to his central argument that politics is the centre of American life in a way it isn’t elsewhere:

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434 Cadden, Michael Strange Angel the pink listing of Roy Cohn Geis/Kruger p83.
436 Ibid
[T]here are no angels in America, no spiritual past, no racial past, there’s only the political, and the decoys and the ploys to manoeuvre around the inescapable battle of politics, the shifting downwards and outwards of political power to the people.\(^{438}\)

For Louis, then, politics is the central facet of American life. The argument, problematic in many ways, becomes more so in light of AIDS. If, as Louis puts it, race is less relevant than politics then surely this is shared by sexuality and by default AIDS. When Louis declares that ‘there are no angels in America’ he means that America is a country devoid of spiritual past; a country, in fact, where only politics counts.\(^{439}\) He uses this as further justification of his political outlook. And in his personal conflict with AIDS, Louis retreats into the political. In a long political diatribe, Louis finally brings together AIDS and politics, saying: ‘That’s just liberalism, the worst kind of liberalism, really bourgeois tolerance, and I think what AIDS shows us is the limits of tolerance.’\(^{440}\) At this point Louis brings his and the audience’s focus from a wider political spectrum to that of AIDS, and the notions of community into politics of AIDS.

Kushner’s politics are a departure from previous AIDS plays, such as Hoffan’s *As Is* and Kramer’s *The Normal Heart*, the latter of which may be described as a deeply polemic text. But Kushner himself said, ‘it’s no fun to watch polemics’\(^{441}\); and he sees no reason why the aesthetic event and the political event must be separate.\(^{442}\) As noted previously, Kushner sees the theatre much like a dream state in which psychological narrative realism works: ‘left alone in a semi-trance state with a bunch of other people we enact scenes you wouldn’t want to see in everyday life and when an audience leaves it is their choice what to remember.’\(^{443}\) The politics are also wider, beyond AIDS, beyond even the anti-Republican anti-Reagan stance of his work, Kushner is concerned with politics in the broader, more philosophical sense.

The use of the Angels as characters provides both a vehicle for such sweeping political tracts while also functioning theatrically in the mode of the Brechtian Epic theatre.\(^{444}\)

\(^{439}\) *Millennium*, Act 3, Scene, 2, p.94.
\(^{441}\) Ibid.
\(^{442}\) Ibid.
\(^{443}\) Ibid.
\(^{444}\) Reinelt J, mentions this approach by Kushner In *Notes on Angels in America as American epic theatre* in Geis Deborah R and Kruger Steven F Eds, *Approaching the Millennium; essays on Angels in America*, Ann Arbor,
Brecht, however, demanded that theatre confess the means of its production. His audience would see the means of all theatrical illusion and as a consequence be immune to its magic. This means utilising the approach of Epic theatre, in which the playgoer is not intended to leave feeling better, but to go away feeling wiser and more capable. Relating Kushner’s work to the earlier activist theatre, this approach requires an active audience that will not be simply told what to think, but will engage and discover things for themselves. Instead of sharing an experience the spectator must come to grips with things themselves. Brecht's idea of Epic is informed by the ideas of Goethe and Schiller regarding the mood and character of epic poetry and that there should be a rational, calm detachment. He believed that the audience should be made not to feel, but to think. Kushner is not as directly activist in his work as Kramer or ACT UP performances, but this does not detract from the overarching philosophical political message. Kushner, in Angels, can be viewed as more ambivalent about these political facets than Brecht; acknowledging that maybe an audience should see some of the workings, but that they should still experience the magic, “[r]ealised as bits of wonderful theatrical illusion.”

Kushner goes beyond the Brechtian theatre, incorporating the lyrical American tradition of drama alongside elements of the Brechtian form. It is this marriage of the Brechtian Epic format and the traditional lyrical drama together which form the crux of the play’s depictions of AIDS.

The staging of the Angel is important to the performance, and so to Kushner’s political message. In Donnellan’s production, the Angel is depicted as Western imagery of Angels would dictate: blond haired in a white gown with large white feathered wings. She breaks through the back wall of the Cottesloe in a blaze of light at the end of Act 1. The Angel, as per Kushner’s instructions, is seen on wires which suspend her above Prior’s bed for her entrance, but Donnellan’s production also adheres to Kushner’s instructions for the illusion, and so the Angel is ‘fabulous ’also. This staging creates and demonstrates a mixture of influences and purposes for the Angel. While the Angel functions as a conduit for some of the influences of Benjamin’s philosophy, and delivering Kushner’s political philosophy of the play, the manner in which she is staged echoes the influence of Brechtian Epic theatre on Kushner’s work. The style and approach of Donnellan and Ormerod drew out
these elements in their production emphasising the fantastical elements that draw out the play’s political facets this is seen most clearly with the Angel.

In the initial encounters with the Angel, it appears that she is a messenger, telling Prior that AIDS is not the end of him and that AIDS for Prior and therefore for others may declare some higher purpose. The first indication of the Angel, in Millennium Act 1 Scene 7, is when a voice commands Prior to ‘[p]repare the way’. It would appear, as it does to Prior, that this is an indication of his imminent demise. However, this is not the case, as the voice explains in the second encounter. Here, the voice tells him he will undertake ‘a marvelous work and a wonder’ which hints at Kushner prescribing a greater purpose for Prior – that he may be sending a message or making a political statement that there is more to be said about AIDS than simply depicting its victims dying.

This suggestion of a purpose for Prior continues throughout Millennium, in which the voice of the Angel comes to be accompanied by manifestations of Prior's ancestors declaring Prior's purpose as ‘a prophet’. The narrative in these exchanges, for the remainder of Millennium, strays more into the realm of religion and spirituality than politics. In taking the AIDS debate into the realm of the Angel and the supernatural, it becomes separated from the specific politics of America somewhat and into the wider politics of AIDS, something that a British audience would find more accessible. Although it is a ‘gay fantasia on National themes’, and one of distinctly American identity, these angelic encounters take on a more international, even universal dimension. The use of seven Angels that Prior meets in the heaven scene. Prior meets seven Angels in addition to the one that has been visiting him in the scene in heaven, the continental principalities as they are gathered in permanent emergency council. bring the themes into a wider realm.

When the heralds (Prior’s ancestors) are in his room, he begins to act in defiance, declaring: ‘[I]ook. Garlic. A mirror. Holy water. Crucifix. FUCK OFF! Get the Fuck out of my room. GO!’ Prior acts rationally, rejecting the supernatural intrusion, performing a very modern rejection of anything inexplicable. His rejection also becomes equated to the rationalization of AIDS, taking it out of the ethereal and supernatural and untouchable realm and placing it firmly in reality. This forms an effective political prescription for a social

448 Kushner, Millennium, Act 1 Scene 7, 1995, p 51.
449 Kushner, Millennium Act 2 Scene 5, 1995, p 42.
450 Kushner, Millennium, Act 2 Scene 5, 1995, p 42.
451 Kushner, Millennium Act 3 Scene 1, 1995, p 1.
452 The Angels; Antarctica, Asiatica, Europa, Africana, Oceana and Australia.
453 Kushner, Millennium Act 3 Scene 7, 1995, p 86.
acceptance of AIDS. This agenda for the supernatural flows through *Angels*; Kushner shows Prior as a gay man fighting not only against AIDS, but against external forces that target him. Here is a clear allegory for the political and social position of those with AIDS in America - and beyond. The idea of appropriate social (and by association political) responses to AIDS is not one which is tied to any one particular country or government. What Prior’s encounter with the Angel does instead is open up this criticism of homophobia and inaction on AIDS to a more general conceit. As he says to the heralds at the end of *Millennium*, ‘I can handle pressure, I am a gay man and I am used to pressure, to trouble.’ Again, he is rationalising the irrational vision he is having. Prior’s character here is acting as a metaphor for rationalising the wider irrationality of AIDS as an epidemic, and the moralistic and political responses to it. In embodying this in the Angel rather than literal politics, Kushner’s text transcends both its time and place and is able to be transposed effectively to Britain.

The Angel’s arrival, in the final scene of *Millennium*, was staged by Donellan drawing on the Brechtian principles that informed Kushner’s writing. The Angel burst through the stage backdrop, an American flag, a staging choice that clearly denotes political associations of the character. However the arrival is clearly a theatrical as well as political moment in the narrative. The culmination of the fantasy sequences in part one, the Angel’s arrival is spectacularly theatrical in Donnellan’s direction. It is, Borreca notes, a theatrical event designed for provoking social awareness. This indicates the importance of staging in developing an Epic theatre work, and the associated political power of this. As Reinelt notes Epic theatre is dependent on production as much as writing. ‘Thus even if Tony Kushner has written a perfectly crafted, totally brilliant epic play script, whether or not it will result in an epic production is always an open question that is always the gamble of political theatre.’

The final encounter with the Angel, however, becomes a directive to America regarding AIDS. To this point Prior has encountered only one Angels who is a ‘messenger’ in this scene he meets the six Angels When Prior ascends to Heaven Here, they act as ‘caretakers’ on behalf of a God who abandoned earth and, swamped in bureaucracy, their doctrine for saving humanity is cessation of progress. The Angels represent the empty and useless words of government: ‘We suffer with you but we do not know. We do not know

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457 In *Perestroika*, Act 5, see Appendix 2.
how. These are words of empty comfort and inaction, a parallel to the way many experienced the American government's response to AIDS. The ideas articulated here may also extend in general to AIDS patients, and gay men who felt let down, left outside of government and societal care. That the Angels follow these useless words with a directive to give in, to give up on life and die also reflects wider feelings about Government and society regarding AIDS patients and gay men. The Angel says: ‘This is the tome of Immobility of respite, of cessation Drink of its bitter water once Prophet and never thirst again.’ In his rejection of this directive, ‘[e]ven sick I want to be alive’, Prior is declaring a continued right to life. Kushner, through Prior, affirms a fight against political and social views that considered AIDS sufferers better off dead, such as in the homophobic attitudes of the press, and kinds of government inaction on AIDS outlined in Chapter 2. Even considering the differences between American and British experience, this invocation to fight his illness, and to fight discrimination for both his illness and his sexuality, would find understanding and empathy in a British audience regardless of personal or national experience of AIDS.

Kushner says ‘[t]he writing teeters between almost parody and very, very dense I don’t know mumbo jumbo, almost incompressible language [sic].’ The Angels are self-consciously theatrical. McLoughlin, the Broadway Angel, comments on their influence: ‘I don’t think Angels should have the last word. They’re only Angels.’ In both the play and within the theatre it is the people who have the last word; Kushner’s characters in their actions and the audience in what they take from the play. It is also worth noting that though we can read the Angels, their politics, and Prior’s response as distinctly aligned with politics of AIDS and queer politics, in fact their remit can extend beyond this to wider lessons for society, and perhaps humanity. The perception of government (or Godly) indifference to human suffering is a metaphor that extends far beyond AIDS. And the idea of Government bureaucracy and resulting inaction has ramifications far beyond American government and AIDS. Even within the performance, the over the top theatricality of the Angels echoes the performance elements of Governments, something British audiences would recognise from their own Parliament.

Prior’s final response to the Angels brings back Kushner’s focus to their role in AIDS

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462 Ibid.
in the play, and the primary message communicated to an audience here. Prior wrestles the Angel, a re-enactment of Biblical encounters with Angels. He is taking charge of the being that wishes to govern him, and so taking charge of his illness and the judgment of others on this illness. In rejecting the prescription of the Angels; in demanding ‘more life’ Prior rejects the political prescription for AIDS in America and asks for a new social concept of AIDS. He asks ‘Bless me anyway’, as a plea for acceptance as both a gay man and a person with AIDS. The request for ‘more life’ has layers of meaning, too: in the first instance he is asking for a literal chance at more life, but he is also making a plea for social tolerance and acceptance of allowing his life to continue. He says:

‘But still. Still.
Bless me anyway.
I want more life. I can’t help myself I do.
I’ve lived through such terrible times, and there are people who live through worse but... You see them living anyway.’

In rejecting the prescription of the Angels - in demanding ‘more life’ - Prior rejects the prescription for his identity that has been ascribed to him by ‘higher powers’. Instead, he claims his own identity, saying ‘Even sick I want to live.’ This can be related back to Benjamin who suggested using an opportunity to ‘blast open the continuum of history’ in order to form an understanding of the ‘time of now’. The request for ‘more life’ has a twofold meaning in terms of political and social implications. James Miller sees Angels in terms of its activist aspects, aligning the ‘epidemic of lies and betrayal’ depicted within the play with the government’s inaction - which is indeed in corroboration with the Angel’s treatise of inaction.

Prior’s demand for action becomes a command both to fellow gay men and those with AIDS as much to those who, like the Angels, are guilty of inaction. As Allen J Frantzen comments:

The Angels’ visit is not intended to save Prior from his disease but, rather to use it against him, to try to persuade [him] to stop the phenomenon of human progress, to get

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463 Ibid.
464 Kushner Perestroika Act 5 Scene 5, 1995, pp266.
465 Ibid.
466 Ibid.
467 Benjamin, W, 1969, p 263.
468 Miller, J Heaven quake: Queer analogies in Kushner’s America Geis/Kruger p 56
him to turn back the clock [...] the AIDS virus is supposed to ensure his desire to stop time.\textsuperscript{469}

He confronts the Angels and their demands of him as ‘prophet’ on behalf of the human race. The Angels ask him for stasis, Prior responds with a philosophy of his own: ‘Motion is…modernity. It’s animating, it’s what living things do. We desire. Even if we desire stillness, it’s still desire for. Even if we go faster than we should.’\textsuperscript{470} What Prior is demonstrating here is that, like Benjamin’s Angel, he has been unable to stop ‘the singular catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage.’\textsuperscript{471} Here, Prior turns his back on the Angel’s message of cessation. In so doing, Prior is standing against what is offered to him as the only option. This imperative for change is therefore at the centre of Kushner’s politics and can relate to the political landscape of Britain as much as America. Regardless of some comparative progress in the treatment of AIDS in comparison with America, Britain still had room for improvement. Kushner is rejecting what he refers to as an ‘ideology of containment’.\textsuperscript{472} He expands this by explaining: ‘Containment demonizes the other, whether it’s Communism or AIDS or Jews.’\textsuperscript{473} In using the Angels as an illustration of this, Kushner develops a political statement about how, in this case America but in practice any society, treats its people.

The Epilogue grounds the play back in the reality not just of the era in which it is set, but within the theatre in which it takes place, turning politics towards the audience, using theatrical style drawn from Brechtian influences the audience is engaged directly with the play. Stepping from his bed, Prior addresses the audience: ‘Bye now. You are fabulous creatures every one. The great work begins.’\textsuperscript{474} This ending is an invitation to action, with Prior taking ownership of the Angels by taking on their words and making an invitation of the audience to do the same. He invites the audience to use his blessing of ‘more life’ as he has done, but does not tell them how. Drawing on key Brechtian principles here, Prior breaks the fourth wall and engages with an audience, giving them political agency. This kind of direct address to an audience is a traditional Brechtian/Epic theatre technique, making an audience

\textsuperscript{471} Benjamin, p 257.
\textsuperscript{473} Ibid.
aware of their part in the play. In this instance it allows Kushner to make an audience aware of the political agency associated with AIDS and their potential role in this.

Kushner achieves this, as explored previously, through his narrative action which both confronts an audience with AIDS and creates an emotional connection. Rather than positioning private and public systems of experience to make a political statement on AIDS, Kushner makes explicit how the two interact. Kushner does not prescribe what his audience should take away from his play, believing that they do not want to be told what to think. Similarly Frank Rich refers to Kushner’s inability to adhere to any theatrical or political possibility. The audience is left to answer the question of how the great work, how social and political action regarding AIDS, may begin.

Kushner’s political stance, which begins within the lens of American 1980s politics, opens out across the two plays into a broader political philosophy. Though the texts contain direct critiques of Reagan’s America and Republican policies, and of American government as a whole, it is a wider political stance with which Kushner eventually concerns himself. The treatise of the Angels, and Prior’s response, can be contextualised as political philosophy, particularly drawing on Williams and Benjamin. In this political approach, and in embedding it in theatricality via the Angels, Kushner opens up the politics allowing the play’s political message to transpose effectively to Britain. The production approach, and the use of the Brechtian Epic style, in particular relating to the arrival of the Angel, demonstrates the use of theatrical style to engage with the depiction of AIDS in a political sense in Donnellan’s production of *Angels* in London.

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475 Roman, 1998, p 83
3.3 Response to *Angels*

The ways in which *Angels* depicted AIDS through performance and how this depiction was transposed to the British stage, have been considered above. It has been shown that the content relating to AIDS was communicated effectively through production choices, and would have successfully worked on the British stage. To conclude the analysis of the National Theatre production of *Angels*, the press reception will be considered and the overall effect of transposing *Angels* to the British stage will be examined.

3.3.1 Press response

In the British press, in the initial response to *Angels*, there was some concern about what they might see from reviewers. Benedict Nightingale viewed both parts with trepidation. He said of part 1 that before viewing he felt:

A three and a half hour play about AIDS is not the most inviting of prospects, nor its American author’s subtitle ‘A gay fantasia on National themes’ the most seductive of theatrical come ons.\(^{478}\)

He closes his view with similar trepidation, still unconvinced by what he has seen, saying: ‘Certainly I have mixed feelings about the sequel he has already promised.’\(^{479}\) This shows that there was apprehensiveness about the form as much as the content: outside of Shakespeare, such lengthy, multi part plays are rare. Nightingale also criticises both a lack of subtlety and, as he sees it, ‘Kushner’s self-awareness at writing an Important Play.’\(^{480}\) A departure from the more reserved British approach to storytelling seen in David Hare, Harold Pinter or Alan Ackyborn, by contrast Kushner’s work was unreservedly brash and perhaps ‘American-looking’ to Nightingale. Contrastingly, as will be shown in Chapter 4 when this thesis moves to musical theatre analysis, in comparison to contemporary British offerings *Rent* was positively understated. Nightingale furthers his critique of Kushner in his response to the second part of *Angels*, of which he comments: ‘His sequel would have to reach Odyssey like heights to not to disappoint those who admired his American Iliad.’\(^{481}\) Nightingale here shows a more reserved approach to Kushner’s playwriting talent; Kushner

\(^{479}\) Ibid.
was not universally regarded as a great playwright by the British press. This also suggests that his overall or enduring influence on the British theatrical landscape may not, if critics like Nightingale are believed, be strong. Nightingale was not converted by the sequel, stating that ‘Part 2 does not add enough to Part 1 to justify its three and a half hour length.’ He highlights the problems here of whether to view the plays individually or as a whole. Kushner maintains that they work as stand-alone pieces, but the time and expense involved in seeing both is an issue for audiences. In highlighting that Part 2 may not add anything significant to the content, Nightingale here is drawing attention to the practicalities for a theatre going audience as much as commenting on artistic content. He does concede that there are moments that are enjoyable and that the acting is strong across the piece; however, his response overall is a measured one, concluding with him only ‘cautiously recommending’ the play.

Nightingale’s view illustrates one of several responses to either or both parts of *Angels* that were not as favourable as the reviews of some of the leading critics, indicating that the text was not regarded with universal acclaim. Billington comments on the strength of Kushner’s work as a text on AIDS and depictions of sexuality, pointing out that it situates AIDS and homosexuality within wider social context, unlike other works. Billington concludes his review by stating: ‘Sprawling and over written as it may be it is a play of epic energy that gets American drama not just out of the closet but thank God out of the living room as well.’

Billington’s response illustrates receptiveness to the wider political agenda of Kushner’s work and the depiction of AIDS alongside an appreciation of the dramatic work. This appreciation of Kushner’s work as a dramatist also demonstrates the impact *Angels* was considered to have on the British theatrical landscape. In his second review, Billington offers derision to a colleague who asked if a second part added anything. Billington himself goes on to praise Kushner’s work on AIDS in *Perestroika*:

The sequel does more than complete the circle, it shows that Aids sufferers can refuse to die secret deaths, argues that stasis and reaction can be defeated and claims that the only hope for the future lies in recognition of our common humanity.

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482 Ibid.
484 Ibid.
485 Billington, M *Angels with Restructured Faces, the Guardian*, London, 22nd November 1993. Billington dismisses the colleague’s question as ‘academic in the face of such roller coaster energy.’
Billington clearly feels strongly that the second part and the content therein are important to both the dramatic storytelling and the messages Kushner seeks to convey. He adds the powerful declaration: ‘Kushner has written a work on the imperative for change.’ As Billington does note, however, the problem arising from multiple productions is the inevitable comparisons between them. This is useful to remember in considering Angels in the British setting. However, the multiple productions actually help the National claim Angels as its own, as the comparisons of the two parts of the play takes focus away from any comparison with the American version. Billington’s review ends with the declaration that: ‘Kushner has written an affirmative work for desperate times.’ This indicates that Billington, as one of the leading theatre critics in Britain, gives his approval to what Kushner had produced - or at least agrees that Kushner’s work gives an impetus for change both social and theatrical.

Nicholas deJongh as noted is also an influential critic. The Evening Standard is a significant voice in theatre criticism and has also been a long-time supporter of London theatre. deJongh showed an emphatic enthusiasm for the initial production, stating: ‘[s]omething rare dangerous and harrowing has erupted upon the London stage. Tony Kushner’s Angels in America is like a roman candle hurled into a drawing room.’ He went on to refer to a ‘particular incandescence’ and ‘a mingling of horrors and the blackest shades of humour’. deJongh shows, then, that the work had an impact on him as a reviewer. He supports this with a quotation from National Theatre artistic director Richard Eyre, who states that Kushner is ‘the most important American playwright to emerge since Mamet.’ DeJongh, in this accolade and his commentary, like Billington focuses on the wide scope of Kushner’s play, saying: ‘the scope is daring: The bonds of realism are breached with ghosts, hallucinations, divine visions and magic.’ Within this, he also praises the wider remit of the play's examination of sexual politics and reference to AIDS, describing the ‘force of Kushner’s vision of an intolerant America fostering disturbed people.’ Like Billington, he also praises the production and acting, his review creating the impression of a high calibre performance of a significant work.

487 Ibid.
488 Ibid.
490 Ibid.
491 Ibid.
492 Ibid.
In considering press responses to Angels it becomes clear that the significance of Kushner’s work on AIDS was forcibly recognised by British critics. In his review, deJongh described: ‘A state of the nation report, relating to the AIDS epidemic and those caught in its horrible throes to America’s political and social condition’\textsuperscript{493}, adding that there were ‘rounds of sexual politics…conducted in the midst of a debate about America itself-accused of lacking an indigenous, spiritual past.’\textsuperscript{494} By saying this, deJongh was acknowledging the American focused nature of the text but not finding this to be a fault.

Much was made of the content being about AIDS and gay men. Paul Taylor of The Independent reports heard someone in the foyer say ‘It’s the AIDS one’, which he compares to describing Lear as ‘the one about ingratitude. You know the old chap and three daughters.’\textsuperscript{495} This illustrates that some reviewers, such as Taylor, did see the reductive nature of this tag - although the tag of ‘AIDS’ or ‘Gay play’ is one that is dominant across press coverage. This response is understandable given the potentially provocative nature of these topics; and most reviewers in their analysis do delve beyond this to other aspects of the text. Reviews also demonstrated a more in-depth consideration of the content relating to both AIDS and homosexuality. One such comment drew on the fact that Kushner was developing the AIDS play beyond previous models: ‘Kushner avoids the melodrama inherent in many AIDS plays by constantly relating Sex to social attitudes.’\textsuperscript{496} These broad responses illustrate that while there was some trepidation from reviewers, there was also an appreciation of what Kushner, along with the National, was attempting in terms of plays depicting AIDS.

This view of the importance of Angels can be seen in Matt Wolf’s survey of AIDS drama\textsuperscript{497}, in which he counts Angels as one of the new generation of plays. He describes how these new plays work:

From this devastation, a provocative theatrical literature has emerged: AIDS plays that approach the disease not head-on but obliquely, either as metaphor or as a fact with which its characters are very familiar.\textsuperscript{498} For Wolf, then, this is a progression from the ‘full frontal’\textsuperscript{499} approach of previous writers such as Larry Kramer. Wolf situates this in the London theatre’s response to AIDS in general,

\textsuperscript{494} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{499} Wolf, Matt, “Angels in America”, City Limits, London, 29th January 1992
comparing the performance of *Elegies for Angels Punks and Raging Queens*, and the success of the American play *Jeffery*, performed off-Broadway, that he cites as a first ‘genuine comedy about AIDS’. Wolf’s article also indirectly highlights the importance of *Angels* as a vanguard production on AIDS in London, citing other plays he, and other reviewers, have deemed successful but were yet to arrive. His comments on these plays have dual significance. Firstly, he describes them and *Angels* with them, as a more oblique drama dealing with the topic of AIDS rather than a head on approach, which is telling in terms of *Angels*’ success. This form of indirect politics and more subtle storytelling was appealing to the audience sensitivities and perhaps fitted better with the theatrical landscape of Britain at this time. Reviews noted the nature of Kushner’s play as progressive an example of American drama. Reviewers observed and commented on those facets of *Angels* which represented innovations in depictions of AIDS.

In the press response to the plays, the innovations of Kushner’s work were not just noted but also appreciated; and the progress is marked in both gay drama and depictions of AIDS on stage. There was much focus on the daring nature of the play which pushed the previous boundaries of what had been seen on the British stage. The American press, likewise, frequently commented on the British production in their reviews. Many commented on the acclaim *Angels* had in London. *The Wall Street Journal*, *The New Yorker* and *The Village Voice* all make note of the influential British production in their reviews. John Lahr of the *New Yorker* notes that *Perestroika* was work-shopped by George C Wolfe and the New York Company between productions.

This indicates both the perceived significance by reviewers of the British production on the American production and the awareness of the critics of this American production in relation to the British. Frank Rich of the *New York Times* went as far as to say that the hype was such ‘you may think you’ve already seen it’. Rich is an influential critic who has been known to make or break productions; his *New York Times* reviews are seen as vital for New York theatre. It is well documented, for example, that Jonathan Larson, in writing *Rent*, was

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502 *The Normal Heart*, regarded in American theatre as a landmark work of both Gay theatre and AIDS drama, had yet to be staged in Britain. Despite as Wolf states, the success of *Jeffery* off Broadway, a production in Britain had also not been seen. Wolf’s article concludes by reflecting on AIDS related drama that is more familiar to British audiences including *Marvin’s Room* and *The Baltimore Waltz*.
most concerned about the *New York Times* review. Equally, the panning by Rich in *The Times* for Lucy Prebble’s play *Enron* is seen as intrinsic to its closure after less than a month. For *Angels*, however, Rich is full of praise. This was also reflected in much of the rest of the critical response, which was resoundingly positive. *Angels* drew accolades such as the following comment from *Variety*: ‘Believe the hype: This smartly ambitious unabashedly sprawling glitteringly provocative frequently harbours and urgently poignant play is as revelatory as the title suggests.’ *Newsweek* comments that it was ‘the most intelligent most passionate American play in recent memory.’ These samples indicate an overall positive reception to *Angels*. That the play was received well in Kushner’s native New York should not be surprising, however, considering the strong reception it received in the more difficult transposition to London.

### 3.3.2 *Angels* AIDS and theatre in Britain

*Angels*, as shown here, effectively transposed depictions of AIDS to the British stage; performing and illustrating AIDS through physical and medical depictions, and use of language. The emotions and politics of Kushner’s work allow an audience to connect with these depictions and discussions of AIDS regardless of the play’s transposition to a foreign stage. It is argued also that its innovative theatrical approach and the inclusion of potentially controversial themes represent a substantial contribution to the British theatrical landscape.

The timing of Kushner’s play was important in terms of the social and theatrical context into which it was transposed. In Britain, AIDS had yet to reach the same levels of crisis as in America, and British dramatists had not felt the same urgency to respond as their trans-Atlantic counterparts. Within the National Theatre, the relatively new leadership of Richard Eyre was just beginning to establish a new leadership with new and innovative works, of which *Angels* was one. In the commercial West End, financial security following the years of austerity in the 1980s was still prevalent, and the ‘safe bets’ of the Andrew Lloyd Webber and Cameron Mackintosh ‘mega musicals’ were still dominating, alongside tried and tested plays. *Angels* was therefore a daring and innovative offering for the British stage, but one which, occurring in arguably a slight slump in dramatic innovations, audiences were ready for. The wider parts of Kushner’s message - issues of politics, of healthcare and the wider politics of America - are carried both by Kushner’s narrative and Donnellan’s direction.

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To return to Kushner’s quotation: ‘I don’t know how British audiences will respond’\textsuperscript{509}, it is important to add that later, when interviewed for the National Theatre’s Platforms series he goes on to say, ‘I now believe it works here.’\textsuperscript{510} Kushner himself believes, then, that his play has successfully transposed to the British theatrical landscape. Kushner may have been right to be wary about a British response to his text. The world that Kushner explores is one in which queer characters are excluded; and he responds by putting them at centre stage. This approach is, as deJongh states are ‘explored with a vigour that no English playwright has mustered’\textsuperscript{511}. He also opened up the theatrical dialogue on AIDS from a niche audience to the National Stage. The content and approach of Kushner’s play, fortified by Donnellan and Ormerod’s staging at the National’s Cottesloe space, created a confrontational piece of ‘AIDS theatre.’ Audiences were confronted with both the physical and emotional impact of AIDS via a close quarter theatrical encounter. Kushner’s text, through Donnellan’s realisation, included physical manifestations and subsequently confrontations for the audience with AIDS.

Kushner’s Angels represented a departure from the previous model of AIDS plays, particularly in Britain which had seen less of a theatrical response to AIDS than America. In staging Angels at the National there was a recognition that AIDS plays, and particularly Kushner’s work, were of enough importance to be staged in such a prestigious venue. Following Angels at the National, the next major AIDS play transposed to British theatres was Rent, a commercial West End musical. The staging of an imported musical in a commercial setting has a different set of connotations in terms of transposing theatrical works on AIDS to the British stage. Rent and the ways by which it represented AIDS when transposed to the British stage will be explored in the next chapter.

\textsuperscript{509} Kushner, T, in Mars-Jones, National Theatre Platform, 24\textsuperscript{th} January 1992.
\textsuperscript{510} Ibid.
Chapter 4: Bohemians in the West End: Jonathan Larson’s *Rent*

4.1 Introduction

This chapter will consider Jonathan Larson’s musical *Rent* (1996) in its depiction of AIDS on the British stage. *Rent* was a huge hit on Broadway, winning three Tony Awards, including Best Musical and earning composer Larson the Pulitzer Prize for Drama. It will be argued that *Rent’s* musical style and approach to dealing with AIDS offered an alternative to previous ‘AIDS Plays’ - in particular that of *Angels*. *Rent* differs to *Angels* in style and form, and depicts and connects with a different demographic. The depiction of AIDS in *Rent* is created through different theatrical approaches to those used in *Angels* and other predecessors. Being a musical, the depiction of AIDS in *Rent* will necessarily be different in its presentation to that of plays like *Angels*.

*Rent* engaged audiences both through its medium - the musical - and its approach to AIDS. As original cast member Taye Diggs commented, talking about the musical’s move to Broadway:

[w]e need to take it to the people who don’t know. Let’s get to Broadway so these other people who are coming from all over the place because it’s the hot ticket in town will leave with something they didn’t come in with.  

The significance of the theatrical landscape into which *Rent* was delivered in London will continue to be considered across the analysis of *Rent’s* reception there. Diggs’s statement supports the argument here, that *Rent* reached audiences in a different way to previous AIDS performances. In part related to its musical format, in part due to the demographics depicted in the text, *Rent’s* appeal went beyond that of its predecessors.

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512 In 1996 the Pulitzer Prize was awarded posthumously to Jonathan Larson, who died earlier that year. *Rent* is one of only eight musicals to win the Pulitzer prize for Drama. The others are: George and Ira Gershwin's *Of Thee I Sing* (1932), Rodgers and Hammerstein's *South Pacific* (1950), Bock & Harnick's *Fiorello!* (1960), Frank Loesser's *How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying* (1962), Marvin Hamlisch, Ed Kleban, James Kirkwood, and Nicholas Dante's *A Chorus Line* (1976), Stephen Sondheim and James Lapine's *Sunday in the Park with George* (1985), Jonathan Larson's *Rent* (1996), and Brian Yorkey and Tom Kitt's *Next to Normal* (2010).

513 McDonnell, E., & Silberer, K. *Rent*. New York, NY: Rob Weisbach Books, 1997, p 57. (You’ve used first initials for the authors here, but almost everywhere else you use their full names.)
The untimely death of Rent composer and lyricist Jonathan Larson resulted in a large amount of press attention for both the theatrical text and the author. Press articles, both those about Larson and those reviewing Rent, along with articles from the press will be included in forming a picture of the theatrical text in analysis.

There has, as noted in Chapter 1, been little academic analysis of Larson’s work. David Roman dedicates his afterword to analysis of Rent but acknowledges that at the time of his writing, he could not offer a comprehensive analysis of the text. In writing which appeared soon after Rent opened, Roman’s analysis also cannot consider any long-ranging reception beyond the first Broadway production. Existing academic analyses can be found in several journal articles, ranging from investigations into fan responses, which focus more on the filmed version of the text and therefore are not as applicable to this study. Sarah Ellis Taylor considers Larson’s adaptation of Puccini’s opera, as well as examining queer and ethnic identities in his text. David Savran, another theorist who has written on Rent, focusing on its multiculturalism; Savran has also written more generally on queer identities in theatre. Other work directly focusing on Rent includes analysis from Judith Sebesta on transgression and carnival in Rent, which while interesting in its analysis, is again not directly relevant to this study. Ian Nisbet’s analysis of the relationship between Puccini’s opera and Rent indicates serious musical and artistic consideration of the piece as a work of musical theatre. These articles show a small but varied academic response to Rent.

Rent is also considered in academic texts relating to the American musical. Such was the reception of Rent that few analyses of musical theatre written after Rent avoid mentioning it. Roman’s chapter again considers Rent’s place in musical theatre, but his focus is on the depiction of AIDS, and as noted above is very short ranging. In Broadway: The American

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517 Ellis, Sarah Taylor, ‘No day but today’ : Queer Temporality in Rent, Studies in Musical Theatre, Volume 5, Number 2, 2011.
a section on *Rent* highlights its relation to the rise of Rock Musicals. Similar analysis is found in Bordman’s *American Musical Theatre, A Chronicle*. Alongside these, notable works that cite or use *Rent* as an illustration of the period or of its influence on musical theatre include Miranda Lunskaer-Neilson’s *Directors and the New Musical Drama: British and American Musical Theatre in the 1980s and 1990s*, which places *Rent* in the context of British and American theatrical exchange. Gerald Bordman offers a similar analysis in *American Musical Theatre; a Chronicle*, in which he places *Rent* in the wider context of musical theatre in Britain and America. This, however, is the main extent of previous work, which indicates that while *Rent* has become integrated into the history of American musical theatre, and that some academic analysis has been directed at it, there is not substantial analysis to date.

### 4.1.1 Staging *Rent* in New York

The original Broadway programme notes that ‘Larson’s life is a finite chapter in the show’s on-going story.’ As a composer, his background influences the production and depiction of AIDS; and his tragic death following the final dress rehearsal of *Rent* overshadows the production. Larson’s personal background influenced his writing *Rent*.

Larson left University in 1982, the same year that the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [sic] fully identified and named the AIDS virus. By the early 1990s, Larson had begun incorporating the effect of the AIDS epidemic into his work, largely due to the HIV diagnosis of his close friend Matt O’Grady. At this point, Larson was introduced to playwright Billy Aronson by Ira Weitzman, the musical theatre programme director at Playwrights Horizons, where Larson had staged his workshop of *Superbia*. Aronson had

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526 The influence of O’Grady’s HIV diagnosis is also fictionalised by Larson in ‘Tick Tick Boom,’ his autobiographical musical. *Tick Tick Boom* was performed by Larson as a solo show in 1990 and rewritten for a cast of four by playwright David Auburn. It was performed off Broadway in 2001. This production is considered in more depth in Chapters 5 and 6.
been considering an idea around adapting Puccini’s *La Boheme* \(^{528}\) and bringing it to the contemporary setting of 1980s New York City. Aronson said of his idea:

‘The similarities between those artists and their poverty and New York in the 1980s really struck me. The numbers of homeless people were shooting up and people were dying all around us. There was AIDS and a lack of government support for the arts. I wanted to rework the plot of the opera, which is very choppy like a Samuel Beckett play. One thing that excited him [Larson] is that it was both highbrow and lowbrow.’ \(^{529}\)

This approach appealed to Larson’s concern with contemporary social issues. In discussion with Aronson, Larson convinced Aronson to alter his setting of the new *Boheme* from the prestigious Upper West Side to the more artistic, grungy East Village. \(^{530}\) Larson felt that the population of the East Village was more on a par with the characters from Puccini’s *Opera and Merger’s* novel \(^{531}\) than those in the more bourgeoisie Upper West Side. The idea of adapting a classic also coalesced with Jonathan’s artistic outlook, as close friend Eddie Rosenstein comments:

Jonathan’s idea was that you have to look at the classics. He was a student of the Aristotelian dramaturgy and felt that you structured everything after the classics. Once that was complete, you departed. \(^{532}\)

In adapting *La Boheme* and developing the first of the original songs, Larson and Aronson worked to adapt these ideas to the musical theatre form. In beginning this adaptation Larson and Aronson composed drafts of three songs that still remain in *Rent*: the title song ‘*Rent*’, ‘*Santa Fe*’ and ‘*I should tell you.*’ These musical numbers cemented the style of pop-rock-musical that *Rent* was to become. The collaboration with Aronson allowed the initial concepts and musical identity to take shape but Larson quickly developed strong ideas about the Project, influencing Aronson, as noted, to change the location. He also developed the title and began to shape the story of *La Boheme* on his own terms, specifically, that Mimi should live at the end, unlike the opera and novel. Larson felt strongly he wanted to write a piece about hope rather than despair, an element that would set *Rent* apart in terms of AIDS performance. In including the gay and lesbian characters, including a drag queen, Larson was also queering

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\(^{528}\) Giacomo Puccini, *La Boheme*, 1896.


\(^{531}\) Murger, Henri, *Scènes de la vie de Bohème*, 1851.

the existing text, an element explored in more detail later in this chapter. The producers had cancelled the official performance initially on hearing of Larson’s death, but the team felt strongly they should perform Jonathan’s work that night. As Jim Nicola said, ‘It struck me that it was really important that at eight that night Jonathan’s music be out there.’

Some writing on Rent has explored this musical and thematic connection to Puccini’s novel in connection in more detail. Ian Nisbet explores the musical relationship between Larson’s writing and Puccini’s opera. He details both the plot and musical similarities to illustrate how Larson, as in Rosenstein’s remarks above, took direct influence from the classic he appropriated for Rent. It does not serve the analysis of Larson’s depiction of AIDS to consider in detail his direct musical transposition of Puccini’s work however his transposition of the narrative and the connotations of disease and social status that Puccini explored certainly resonate in Larson’s updated depiction of illness in a more recent period. The title ‘Rent’ is used for its double meaning: first to do with the payment for accommodation that is a running theme in the ‘bohemians’ problems, and secondly for its meaning ‘to tear apart,’ a metaphor for the community torn by AIDS and other social problems in the narrative.

By 1991 four of Larson’s close friends had been diagnosed with HIV. Indeed Larson himself had confronted the fear of a HIV diagnosis, as one of those four friends was his ex-girlfriend, which meant that Larson had been exposed to the virus. This personal closeness to the AIDS epidemic pushed Larson to continue what he and Aronson had begun. As Victoria Leacock Hoffman describes in her introduction to the published version of Rent: ‘[Rent] is a] canvas large enough to honor his [Larson’s] friends and to raise awareness about AIDS and the social injustices he saw every day.’ Larson’s 1992 statement of the concept for Rent echoes the focus on HIV/AIDS he would bring to it:

‘Inspired in part by Susan Sontag’s ‘AIDS and its metaphors’ the aim is to quash the already clichéd “AIDS Victim” stereotypes and point out that A. People with AIDS can live full lives’ B. AIDS affects everyone—not just homosexuals and drug abusers; C. in

535 Leacock, Hoffman, Rent is Real introduction in Larson, Jonathan, Rent is Real, 2008, p xiii.
536 Leacock, Hoffman, Rent is Real introduction in Larson, Jonathan; Rent is Real, 2008, p xiii.
our desensitised culture, the ones grappling with life and death issues often live more fully than members of the so called ‘Mainstream’\textsuperscript{537} [sic]

This description illustrates the motivation behind Larson’s work; he was working from personal experience of the AIDS epidemic and its effect on his peer group. He also draws, as he notes, on Susan Sontag’s work, using the consideration of cultural meaning attributed to illness that Sontag explores in both \textit{AIDS and its Metaphors}, \textsuperscript{538} and the earlier \textit{Illness and its Metaphors}.\textsuperscript{539} What Sontag considers in both of these works is the type of language used to talk about AIDS and how, as a result, society views these illnesses.

One of the key elements of Sontag’s argument is the idea that feared diseases such as AIDS result in the dehumanising of its victims. It is here in particular that Larson’s work intersects with Sontag’s thinking. In the above quotation Larson expresses the need to remove the concept of an ‘AIDS victim’ a concept that is a dehumanising idea. Sontag also makes the analogy of AIDS as taking over the entire identity of a person, exploring the stigma as in Larson’s description of the ‘clichéd AIDS victim’ that surrounded those with AIDS. For Larson, who, as mentioned above, was dealing personally with the effects of losing friends to AIDS, the manner in which Sontag discusses AIDS and challenges society to consider a different way of thinking about those with AIDS could have inspired Larson’s thinking on the nature of the person with AIDS that he depicts in \textit{Rent}.

Larson notes in his manifesto above that he wishes to show people with AIDS as individuals, not as victims, and to show their diversity. Again he draws on Sontag’s idea of relative perceptions of diseases. Sontag writes about those diseases that society finds most terrifying which are not the most widespread or the most lethal, but those that are seen to be dehumanising. Larson’s work reflects this through the idea of people with AIDS being more than just ‘victims’ and being beyond the perceived groups of homosexuals and drug users. In actuality Larson’s characters do not transcend the categories of homosexuals and drug users. However, they do, as explored, transcend simply the identity of ‘AIDS victim’. Larson’s characters respond emotionally to the impact of AIDS, as explored further in this chapter, and in so doing \textit{Rent} is reacting to the type of ‘dehumanisation’ Sontag discusses. In presenting, through art characters that counteract this dehumanisation, Larson is participating in an

attempt to reverse the negative manner in which society has talked about AIDS that Sontag writes about. The manner in which society views AIDS can be closely linked to cultural and artistic depictions. If the only depictions of AIDS continue to be the dehumanised image of the ‘AIDS victim’ that both Sontag and Larson wish to dissipate, then there will be little progress in cultural understanding or empathy of the condition.

Though Larson does not explore these elements explicitly in *Rent* in relation to AIDS, he does explore the idea of society perceiving people with AIDS as outsiders from mainstream culture and excluding them from society. Both of these elements could be viewed as inspired by Sontag’s work. What Larson takes from Sontag is a crystallising of ideas based on his experience. His characters share this experience, and though not written primarily as an educational conduit, in part, the work does function in the broader re-education of society in relation to the dehumanisation of the AIDS victim.

*Rent*, through its depictions of characters with AIDS, shows the personal emotional impact their illness has and takes AIDS away from the dehumanising aspects that Sontag’s work discusses. In drawing on Sontag’s criticisms of how cultural language and illness (specifically AIDS) impacts those affected, Larson is able to offer a counter. As explored in this chapter, *Rent* offers a potential for audiences to connect with the emotional impact of AIDS without needing to know or understand the finer medical facts that had been the dominant cultural discourse to this point. Larson’s work is therefore, contributing to a shift in the depiction of people with AIDS. Influenced, as shown, by Sontag’s discussion of the cultural depiction of people with AIDS, and through his own personal experiences, *Rent* is an attempt through cultural discourse and representation to alter society’s perceptions of people with AIDS.

What Larson was also attempting with *Rent* was a new engagement with AIDS through musical theatre. This element, *Rent’s* theatrical form, is equally as important as the influence of Sontag on Larson’s work. He sought to produce new work in musical theatre as much as he sought to depict and alter perceptions of AIDS. As a parallel to Sontag’s influence, Stephen Sondheim had heavily influenced Larson’s creative life. Larson met Sondheim while studying at Adelphi University, and the composer became a mentor. Sondheim encouraged him to pursue writing over performing, and it was through this influence that Larson began to consider ways to put his own stamp on the musical theatre genre. What Larson had, was a ‘vision for musical theatre that was both political and
aesthetic. He felt frustrated by the current form and state of musical theatre, dominated as it was by big budget sensational productions which lacked content or ‘highbrow’ music. The drive to change the musical theatre aesthetic became wedded with the desire to affect change in perceptions and depictions of AIDS.

Larson began looking for a place to produce Rent in early 1992. He approached Jim Nicola of New York Theatre Workshop, a small off-Broadway theatre based in the East Village. The company had recently moved to the East Village, and Nicola thought Rent would be a good fit as a piece which would reflect the community in which they were now based. Nicola also remembers being swayed by the new musical approach Rent was taking; he saw the piece as immediately different to other musical theatre offerings of the time. Following a workshop production and the involvement of director Michael Greif and producers Jeffery Seller and John McCollum, the off-Broadway production was scheduled for January 1996.

The show was cast with some of the actors from the workshop reprising their roles. Casting is significant in both the original production and in its transfer to London. The acting of the original cast not only influences how the roles will be created, but also acts as a physical and stylistic blueprint for future productions. Tesley and Grief were keen for what they called ‘authentic’ casting, so for some of the roles not cast from the workshop, they began to look around other types of performers. Anthony Rapp comments that Larson told his family that ‘we [the cast] were the sexiest, most talented, most exciting group of people he had ever seen assembled.’ Because the cast were young, urban people like Larson himself, they had personally experienced many of the themes of Rent. Like Larson, they were members of the generation who had seen the effect of AIDS from their teenage years and during their 20s. They were people who had lost and would go on to lose friends to the disease, and they were also the first generation whose lives were affected by AIDS.

Rent began rehearsals in January 1996, and it is at this point the story of Rent turns into something of a Broadway legend; after watching the final dress rehearsal of Rent the night before the first full production was staged, Larson was interviewed by The New York
Times\textsuperscript{545} - after which he went home, suffered an aortic aneurism and died. Larson was discovered by his roommate at 3.30 that morning. The following day, the theatre that was staging Larson’s work decided to continue with the production, reflecting what Larson had sought to represent: the community pulling together in crisis and the influence of art on people’s lives. During the day people gathered to talk about Larson, and in the evening his work was performed to family and friends.

That night the cast performed the entire show; initially, they sat and simply sang, but eventually, they got up and performed. Many of the cast and people associated with the production felt that Larson’s death truly galvanised his message of ‘no day but today’ and reflected the endurance of life which he had written into the piece; and this gave them a new determination to succeed with his work.\textsuperscript{546} His father Al Larson said to Anthony Rapp after the performance, ‘You have to make this a hit;’\textsuperscript{547} and Rapp echoes this, saying he felt, ‘We have this to do for as long as we can now, and we have to do it as best we can.’\textsuperscript{548} The effect of Larson’s death was clearly profound on the cast and influenced the course of Rent’s production. Jonathan Larson’s death certainly was an issue for Rent’s development: losing the composer at a critical stage in development meant that the remaining creative team had to make judgements about what Larson would or wouldn’t have wanted when making changes. It is also likely that they restricted re-working the text following opening night and in the move to Broadway. If Larson had lived, it is likely the version of Rent that was staged on that opening night would have been altered directly afterwards; and certainly by the time it moved to Broadway, changes would have been made. This is not meant to disparage the version of Rent Larson produced to this point; it is merely to state that it is standard practice to continue re-working a new musical, particularly when moving from off-Broadway to Broadway.

Alongside the problem that losing a composer gave the production team in terms of re-working Larson’s text, Larson’s death also gained early press attention for Rent. Cynical responses have always protested that the ‘romanticising’ of Larson’s death is the sole reason for the success of Rent. It cannot be denied that the story was newsworthy and indeed brought

\textsuperscript{545} Anthony Tomasini had wanted to interview Larson to discuss Rent, which was coinciding with the 100\textsuperscript{th} anniversary of La Boheme. Tomassini did not publish the interview as planned, but published an article using the material a little later in February 1996. Tomassini, Anthony, \textit{THEATER: A Composer’s Death Echoes in His Musical}, The New York Times, New York, 11 February 1996. <http://www.nytimes.com/1996/02/11/theater/theater-a-composer-s-death-echoes-in-his-musical> [Accessed 4\textsuperscript{th} November 2013.]
\textsuperscript{546} Ibid. Np.
\textsuperscript{547} Rapp, in McDonnell, E., & Silberger, K. \textit{Rent}, 1997, p52.
\textsuperscript{548} Ibid. p52.
in press coverage, and that the themes of *Rent*, affirming life in the face of death, brought attention. However, Larson’s death alone would not be enough to sustain the kinds of ticket sales that expedited its move to Broadway, and sustained it once the transfer was made. The musical clearly connected with an audience downtown. Jim Nicola recounts how the most successful previous shows at NYTW had sold around $8,000, while *Rent* took close to $40,000.\(^549\) The producers began looking for a bigger venue, but at this point the future of the show was uncertain, with strong feelings on both sides as to whether it should remain a downtown show moving to a bigger theatre or move uptown and possibly to Broadway.\(^550\) Eventually it was agreed that *Rent* would move to Broadway’s Nederlander theatre.\(^551\)

*Rent* was transferred to the Nederlander theatre, which could be described as the most ‘downtown’ of the ‘uptown’ theatres. There was also careful consideration given to the theatre venue, in order that its downtown origins should be reflected, even when playing uptown. These elements feed into Carlson’s work on theatre locations and their power in performance. Today, West 41\(^{st}\) Street, where the Nederlander theatre stands, has been enveloped by the radical redevelopment of Times Square that means that it now sees chain stores and restaurants dominating the area. When *Rent* first moved uptown, on the other hand, the Nederlander was still part of the more dilapidated lower end of Times Square; and the nearby 9\(^{th}\) Avenue and Port Authority bus terminal reflected the rundown, slightly scruffy aura of the East Village. The producers didn’t pay for renovations within the theatre, which had been empty for several years, instead retaining the rundown image, choosing to decorate instead with art works from New York Artists. It was a difficult decision for the producers, as Jeffery Seller reflects: ‘One million people said don’t go to Broadway. They said the downtown people won’t go up and the uptown people, because of the subject matter won’t come…I was scared to death.’\(^552\) Seller here is indicating the kind of risk that new musicals undertake in being staged on Broadway. In part, he is pointing out the authentic roots of *Rent* and the connection with the neighbourhood audience it had at NYTW. That it was inextricably linked to the place it was originally conceived and performed was a worry in moving uptown. The producers were concerned that *Rent* would lose the connection to the


\(^550\) A ‘Broadway’ house, much like a ‘West End’ house is not determined by physical location, but by seating capacity. A Broadway house is categorised as any theatre that has more than 1000 seats. Physically these theatres lie in close proximity of one another between West 42\(^{nd}\) Street and 65\(^{th}\) Street.

\(^551\) The Nederlander Theatre situated at 208 West 41\(^{st}\) Street, New York. Owned by the Nederlander group and built in 1921, it had been empty for a number of years and was fairly dilapidated before *Rent* moved in in 1996.

people it depicted, and therefore lose its connection with an audience. This element would also be problematic in transposing it to Britain, with the potential that the connection to both audience and the place it came from would be lost.

The money involved in staging a musical is substantial, and this was also a major concern of Seller’s when Rent was transferred uptown. Steven Alder, in his work on the commercial element of Broadway theatre, breaks down the cost of staging a new musical on Broadway in 2003-4 and estimates this as $14 million.\(^{553}\) Allowing for inflation since Rent was staged, this is still an extraordinarily large sum of money to gamble. Which is why, as Alder also notes, revivals of musicals and staging straight plays are now far more common than new musicals.\(^{554}\) Although Rent had performed well off-Broadway, the economics and audiences of Broadway and off-Broadway are very different.

However, choosing the Nederlander in part strengthened Rent’s transfer. Don Summa, press agent for Rent, commented: ‘The show seemed stronger in a Broadway house, and I never thought it would have.’ He goes on to say that the Nederlander is on a block that is ‘not unlike an East Village block - it was kind of run down, it was - still is - inhabited by homeless people.’ Summa concludes that not only did they find the right theatre but the right surrounding area.\(^{555}\) This setting was to prove key in cultivating the image of Rent for marketing purposes, as Carlson notes in his work that the physical surroundings of a play can influence reception of the performance. This use of the surrounding area to reflect Rent’s content and genesis can be interpreted, as Carlson argues (himself drawing on Eco), through a semiotic analysis of architecture and environment.\(^{556}\) What Rent both subverts and exploits from Carlson’s reading is the notion that theatre places importance on an attractive exterior and commercial façade. Carlson continues that, ‘[A]ny sign, the sign thus formed is immediately open to further development by the addition of new connotations,’\(^{557}\) meaning that the theatrical space, and its connotations, change across time. The Nederlander post-Rent will forever have connotations of the musical. As soon as it opened, Rent began to create new connotations for this particular performance space. The theatrical space can influence

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\(^{557}\) Carlson, 1990, p 43.
audiences, and be used to create associations with the performance, but it cannot erase personal connotations with a particular space. However, because the Nederlander was empty for some years prior to *Rent* moving in, there were no recent performance associations in that space, and *Rent* was freer to make its architectural mark.

*Rent* illustrates what Carlson refers to as an ‘architectural contortion’ of commercial theatre spaces. Physical location was a significant factor in deciding on the New York theatre locations for *Rent*, both for the NYTW production and the Broadway transfer. Although the theatre selected for both was in part chosen for convenience, availability and price, in New York the setting became an integral part of the *Rent* experience for audiences. Helen Lewis and Savran have found this ‘lifestyle experience’ related to the environment of *Rent* problematic; I would argue *Rent* is no guiltier of this than any other theatre performance, particularly musical theatre. In selling theatre as a commercial commodity, producers are selling an artistic experience, often of a world that is considered different or exotic to the audience. Savran compares *Rent* and its depictions of race to *South Pacific*; however, I would argue that the minority cultures in *Rent* are less commoditised than Savran suggests. The point is, however, that all artistic works - particularly those in the commercial theatre - can be accused of co-opting the people or issues they represent.

In Britain, the building in which *Rent* played was of less significance, selected purely on the basis of availability and economics. It can be questioned, therefore, if British audiences lost something in staging without the accompanying ‘appropriate’ theatrical backdrop. For fans, the physical building of the Nederlander became part of the *Rent* experience,’ including leaving messages on a wall in the theatre for the cast and about the show. The experience in Britain was clearly slightly different than for American audiences, who, of course, were also closer to the ‘real life’ setting of *Rent*. However, this does not diminish the experience or effect of *Rent* on audiences in Britain. *Rent* was not designed as site-specific or immersive theatre; and while the surroundings of the Nederlander may have added to the experience for some, it was not necessary for *Rent* to be effective.

I argue that despite the phenomenal commercial success *Rent* went on to achieve, there was honesty in its roots that shows like *South Pacific* or even *Hair* (with its fringe theatre and political roots) both lack. *Rent* was created with a similar motivation to the earlier

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558 A wall at the Nederlander became a part of the associated fan culture and folklore around the musical. Beginning with celebrity visitors signing it, fans joined in leaving messages about the show and the cast.
AIDS plays: Larson was seeking to commemorate those he had lost and use his artistic voice to discuss the issue of AIDS. That *Rent* became so successful should not detract from that fact, nor should it make it a somehow lesser depiction of AIDS.

The musical theatre form becomes imperative in this, as a new way of engaging with AIDS and as a means of reaching diverse audiences. In particular, in the move to Broadway and later London, the audiences that Larson’s musical connected with were potentially different and more diverse than the traditional audience of the ‘AIDS play’. The musical theatre form demands a different approach to performance in general, and by association, the depiction of AIDS. In musical theatre the narrative is driven forward by musical numbers, at times allowing characters to convey emotions not possible through traditional speech. Other musical numbers allow for big narrative changes to be shown. Although the history of musical theatre is beyond the scope of this thesis, it should be said that musical theatre formats are diverse, with many and varied approaches to the use of music as narrative having developed over time.

The form that *Rent* takes is of the ‘sung through’ musical, which means that instead of dialogue interspersed with song, *Rent* is predominantly sung, with minimal spoken dialogue. This approach is fitting given the operatic roots of *Rent*. It also means that music becomes the primary means of communication, characterisation and narrative in Larson’s musical. Without dialogue the music becomes even more significant in conveying information, and in developing the character of the musical itself. In musical theatre the musical style is integral to the identity of the piece. In Larson’s case, the pop-rock music that defined both his own, and *Rent’s* style was of central importance with the musical style of *Rent*, marrying the style of early 1990s pop-rock with musical theatre influences.
4.1.2 Critical Response to the Broadway production

Rent did prove to be incredibly successful on Broadway. During the transfer period from NYTW, it had been announced that Larson had won the Pulitzer Prize for Drama, which garnered even more attention for the show. Rent opened on April 29th 1996, its opening night attended by numerous celebrities including George Clooney, Sigourney Weaver and Isabella Rossellini.\(^{559}\) Integral to success in New York is the New York Times review. As described by Anthony Rapp in his autobiography, cast and producers anxiously awaited the review. Upon reading Ben Brantley’s review, which called the show ‘exhilarating’ and ‘vigorouss’ as well as saying it ‘rushes forward on an electric current of emotion’\(^{560}\), Rapp said: ‘That’s what we needed.’\(^ {561}\) Although the reviews made much of Larson’s death, and it certainly gained the show additional press interest, reviewers were also praising the show itself. As John Lahr said: ‘Larson’s death does not diminish the phenomenal achievement of Rent.’\(^ {562}\) Others followed, praising Rent and citing its revolutionary approach to the musical, including the Village Voice, which states:

With few exceptions Rent is the only important event in the rock musical since Hair. And thanks to its Sondheimian formal sense, it’s a work of consistently higher quality than Hair, which shot off in all kinds of exciting new impulses but barely followed them up.\(^ {563}\)

That The Village Voice here is already placing Rent alongside both Sondheim and Hair indicates a high quality in this new musical. As a new ‘rock musical,’ Rent would inevitably be compared to Hair, but this review considers it superior in quality to the current benchmark of rock musicals, which indicates the kind of reception Rent was having.

This review indicates the significance of the musical theatre form to Rent. Sondheim was a significant influence on Larson. The review also highlights that Rent was significant as much for its innovation and quality in musical theatre as it was for depictions of AIDS. In making comparisons to Hair the iconic rock musical that took on the politics of Vietnam and the era of the Hippie, the review indicates the place of Rent as a significant work of musical theatre.

\(^{562}\) Gerard, Jeremy, Variety, 19th February 1996.
\(^{563}\) Fengold, Michael, The Village Voice, 19th February 1996.
 Amid the praise for Rent and those heralding it as the dawn of a new age of musicals and praising Larson’s style, there was a sense of sentimental lament amongst the reviews for the loss of a young talent; this perhaps would not have been seen to the same degree in British reviews. The Village Voice, perhaps feeling close to the composer and his material as a defender of the same downtown sensibilities as itself, ends its review with the following:

Any rejoicing over Rent comes attached to a tragic sense of loss: we lived to see it and its author did not. I said this review wasn’t going to be about death, but it is. I loved Rent and Jonathan Larson’s dead and yes, I’m crying.564

The sentiment is apparent in this review, and the account has moved beyond a review of the production on stage to the real life events that coloured it. However it is difficult to imagine Billington or deJongh responding the same way in The Guardian or The Evening Standard; although in Britain, scandal and sentiment are the fuel of the tabloid press, London reviewers and theatrical criticism on the whole, tend to shy away from such personalisation. As will be seen in the analysis of the British reception of Rent later in this chapter, critics were in fact perhaps harsher given the associations of Larson’s death and the its publicity that were seen to have fuelled Rent’s progress. Because Rent did indeed progress, and its success in New York soon led producers Seller and McCollum to look to a London production.

564 Fengold, Michael, Rent, The Village Voice, 19th February 1996.
4.1.3 London Transfer

The London transfer of Rent took place in 1998, two years after the Broadway production opening opened, with the show running between 12th May 1998 and 30th October 1999. While this cannot compete with the twelve year Broadway run, Rent’s tenure in the West End, both in its original run and in its subsequent tour and revival in its original format, is still a healthy one. The musical was transposed as a carbon copy of the Broadway production, aside from minor adjustments to set to fit the London theatre, and included several members of the Original Broadway cast. It was riding on a wave of publicity from New York, but this did not guarantee success in Britain. As Benedict Nightingale pointed out in his review, producers did not take any chances, bringing members of the original Broadway cast as ‘insurance.’

The London production was housed at the Shaftsbury Theatre. The luxury of choosing a theatre to perform in based on creative needs is a rarity in London theatre, where space is at a premium. The choice of an ideal theatre space, therefore, was not an option in the London production: the Shaftsbury Theatre, although closed in the late 1960s until 1974, had productions almost continually in the years preceding Rent. The building’s age, along with most other London theatres, prevents extensive renovation. What the Shaftsbury does have in common with the Nederlander, however, is its geographical location, being slightly removed from the main body of theatres in London’s West End. The differences in the theatres and their facades and interiors are also important because they echo the questions raised by Carlson in his analysis surrounding the differences between the two countries’ theatrical traditions in terms of building structure. Located on Shaftsbury Avenue near Tottenham Court Road, the Shaftsbury is situated away from the heart of the West End separating it from the other musical offerings physically as well as stylistically. The London production was of course primarily a business decision for the producers.

The Shaftsbury is the only West End house owned by the Theatre of Comedy Group and its sister company DLT limited. Following the box office success of the Broadway

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565 Rent was performed at the Shaftsbury Theatre, Shaftsbury Avenue, London.
566 Anthony Rapp (Mark), Adam Pascal (Roger), and Jesse L Martin (Collins).
568 Although the Shaftsbury is not a listed building unlike many of London’s theatre buildings, there is a general consensus among theatre owners in the West End to preserve the exterior and interior of buildings to reflect their original form.
569 Carlson asks what are the identifying devices of theatres in different nations and different historical periods, and what this tells us about these theatres. Carlson, 1990, p 54.
production, *Rent* would mark the producer’s first international production. *Rent* in London was given a budget of £1.9 million, a little under the budget of the Broadway production. The show would need to fill 55% capacity per week in the 1,370 seat theatre, which was 142 larger than the Nederlander - to break even.\(^{570}\) With the increased seating capacity, *Rent* in London had the potential to gross $530,000 per week, which almost exactly matched New York.\(^{571}\) Pricing of tickets in London was also substantially less than in New York. By 1998, New York theatre prices had already begun to increase ahead of both the rate of inflation and that of their London counterparts. So while in New York top price tickets for *Rent* had recently reached $80, their London equivalent was $55. By the time *Rent* closed in New York in 2010, ticket prices had peaked at $110, indicating the rapid rate of inflation on ticket prices in the city. Across this time, however, London theatre tickets remained fairly static. The profits from London versus New York in the early years nevertheless show a comparable response in terms of revenue. This indicates that *Rent* was connecting with British the British public in generating audiences. It is worth noting again that unlike New York theatres, which are compelled to publish box office grosses weekly, London theatres do not. Therefore there is no direct comparison for takings available.

This import/export model had come to be the expected approach, set down by models such as *The Phantom of the Opera* for the import/export of the musical theatre production. The London production, was a virtual carbon copy of the American production. This is the approach of many international versions of large scale musicals in part because it is expected that an audience in America wants to see the exact version of for example, *The Phantom of the Opera* that was staged originally in London. In musical theatre the model, developed from the late 1970s onwards, was to replicate the successful production. While in plays the idea of reinvention is often key to revival, in musicals replication is the model mostly followed. The approach to revival in musical theatre therefore is predominantly to create a carbon copy of the original.

The decision to exactly replicate the original production also makes things easier for producers who limit costs by restaging the same production, with the ‘safety net’ of knowing it is already a bankable commodity. The musical is cost and labour intensive, far more so than the average play, so although by musical theatre standards *Rent* was on the cheaper end of the scale, replicating the production exactly limited the cost of transferring. Another valuable


asset to remounting an exact replica of a production in London from Broadway or vice versa, is if original cast members can also be ‘imported’ with the production. As was the case with Rent, with cast members Anthony Rapp, Adam Pascal, Wilson Jermaine Herdia and Jesse L Martin starring again in the London production. This continuity helped to retain a sense of authenticity to the London production despite it being transposed to Britain. By adhering to the same production, audiences are perhaps able to feel they are experiencing Rent as it was in its native environment and not a transposed copy. In musical theatre, the actors involved become heavily associated with their role and become as important as the show itself. To maintain The Phantom of the Opera example, the lead actress, Sarah Brightman, for whom the role of Christine was written, was intrinsic in the show opening in New York. This model is followed to the present day, with recent American import, The Book of Mormon bringing its Broadway lead actors over, thus giving audiences a sense of the ‘original’ experience of the musical. In the case of Rent, the depictions of AIDS were felt to be more authentic due to the fact that the production was the same in America and in Britain. This approach to the production, then may extend to audiences feeling the depictions of AIDS they are experiencing in Rent are by default more authentic.

4.1.4 Staging

There is no full archival recording or record of the London production of Rent, and I did not personally attend the original London production of Rent. I have, as with the analysis of Angels in its original production, based this analysis on that archival evidence which relates to the original London production. Records for commercial productions in London’s West End vary greatly, and in the records held by the V&A theatre archive, there is comparatively little relating to Rent. As noted in the introduction, the V&A hold a press cuttings collection and programmes for all London productions of Rent to date. However, I was also able to access, again as noted in Chapter 1, the recording of the Original Broadway Cast, held by the New York Public Library’s Theatre and Film on Tape Archive.572 This version is used for reference to the original performances by the inaugural cast, some of whom were in the London production.573

572 The performance of Rent was recorded on 28th March 1996, and accessed on 20th July 2012.
573 Cast members who came from New York for the opening of the London production were Anthony Rapp (Mark), Adam Pascal (Roger), Jesse L Martin (Collins), and Wilson Jermaine Herdia (Angel).
I have seen the Broadway production in person several times, and this gives me the groundwork for my understanding of this version of ‘Rent’ and the original London production which mirrored the Broadway production. Therefore while I did not see the original production in person, I believe I have experience of a version of that production. While I did not see the original cast, I did see members of the original cast perform the lead roles. In seeing the Broadway production, alongside the American touring production, I gained insight into what the original production looked and sounded like. While each cast will create its own interpretation, I believe I had a good understanding of what the production was intended to be. This was confirmed in watching the recording of the original Broadway cast in the NYPL archives. In watching this production, (although it was a recording rather than live performance), I was able to gain insight into the original production and performances. I believe this greatly enhanced my understanding of the production and the artistic intentions behind it. In seeing the original cast perform, I also gained further insight into the intended depiction of these characters. This is because the actors work-shopped the piece, working closely with Larson to shape the characters; and because they were seeking an ‘authentic’ feel to the cast, these actors brought a great deal of their personal attributes and influences to the roles.

In seeing this recording of the Original Broadway Cast, I believe I gained insight into the models of performance that subsequent actors taking on the roles would follow. The commercially available recording ‘Rent Live on Broadway,’ a recording of a performance far later in the Broadway run (2008), also provides a point of reference for overall direction and design, which was replicated as closely as possible in London. This accessible (available on DVD) video provides a reference point for aspects of staging. This works as a research tool providing support for personal memory and notes taken from viewing the recordings cited above. As the DVD recording was designed for commercial sale, there is editing, and it has been filmed from a variety of close up angles altering the performance slightly from that seen by the audience. However, it is a recording of the stage version and therefore provides a useful reference tool.

The staging of Rent is important in understanding the tone and approach of Larson’s musical in depicting AIDS. Rent is staged with a minimalist set. The stage is bare and

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574 Between 2004-2009, I viewed the Broadway production 4 times and the American touring production once.
575 During the 2009 American tour, I saw Anthony Rapp and Adam Pascal reprise their roles as Roger and Mark.
industrial in appearance; the dominant colour is grey, and the set has a scaffolding platform above the stage with a staircase leading to it. There is a metallic sculpture/structure to one side that at one point becomes a Christmas tree. The areas of the stage are transformed by the action of Rent through the use of minimal props. The four piece band sits on stage, visible to the audience, and seems to blend into the action as part of the East Village landscape. The main staging is formed by two large metal tables that form various pieces of set from a bed, to a door. Any set that is not made by use of tables and simple props is suggested by the actors’ actions. The staging is similar to the National’s production of Angels as it is actor driven and minimalist. In this, Rent contrasts with the traditional staging of musicals, which is often opulent and spectacular. By stripping back the production, again much like Angels, Rent focuses attention on the music and narrative. In the case of both Rent and Angels, this focuses an audience’s attention on the issues dealt with, including AIDS.

The staging is described by Savran as ‘toward the emblematic and presentational.’ What Savran is referring to is the stark minimalist staging of Rent. This was, in many ways, diversion from the traditional musical theatre approach to staging, particularly the more specular staging of the ‘mega musicals’ of the 1980s. The staging of Rent was indicative of its approach to the musical theatre form, acting as a contrast to the dominant stylistic approach to musical theatre, which is traditionally more opulent and grandiose. The musical theatre format also allows a production to take the opposite approach and become ‘emblematic and presentational’ rather than realistic. This is an acceptable artistic approach in particular within the musical theatre style. This may particularly be the case within sung-through musicals such as Rent. In such examples, an element of the realism in performance is lost allowing for this more ‘presentational’ as well as ‘minimalist’ approach. This serves Rent in several aspects of the production, working with the overall ‘suspension of disbelief’ that accompanies the musical theatre genre in terms of song replacing dialogue. This ‘presentational’ style of musical theatre gives Rent a more distinctive musical theatre identity and sets it apart from its contemporaries as something different in style as well as substance.

Savran aligns Rent’s staging and style with a self-aware and postmodernist approach to the musical. While this is a valid interpretation, the staging of Rent can also be seen as a reflection of the community it aims to depict, and the origins of the musical at NYTW.

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578 Ibid. p9
Although we can read *Rent*'s staging in the fashion suggested by Savran, the reality is that, rather than being a thought out self-reflexive artistic decision as he suggests, it is more likely a matter of convenience and economy. The off-Broadway production budgets would not allow for elaborate sets or costumes, and this was retained in the move to Broadway and eventually London.

This approach also lends itself to the particular form of musical theatre Larson was aiming to create. He was trying to engage with and create a different form of musical theatre approach, as an antidote to the overblown spectacle heavy productions of the era. In creating an antithesis to current trends in the pared-down style of *Rent*, Larson and Grief’s design team showed an awareness of the musical theatre form and ability to adapt this theatrical approach. The pared-down approach served the narrative function of showing the gritty East Village location: it also suited the production budget, while also providing alternative approach to the musical theatre form. For this, and for its rock music approach, *Rent* was set apart from other examples of the musical theatre genre of this time period.

In bringing the show to Broadway, while there was more budget to change sets and costumes, *Rent* was still funded on a comparatively low scale, and the budget was not in the realm of its Andrew Lloyd Webber or Cameron Macintosh counterparts. The existing set was cheap and practical and could be maintained for years with minimal cost and effort. Keeping to the same set also created a sense of continuity between the productions. In so doing, some of the authenticity of the original is was retained. When the production was transferred to London, it would have been possible to bring in a new designer to alter the production, and make the London version distinct. Instead the original design was replicated, maintaining continuity between the original production and London.
4.2 Depictions of AIDS in *Rent*

4.2.1 Characters with AIDS

David Roman in his analysis of *Rent* states: ‘[a]lthough AIDS does not drive the plot of *Rent* AIDS informs and helps to shape it.’ Roman argues that this constant presence of AIDS woven into the plot of *Rent* is intrinsic to its importance and reception. AIDS in *Rent* is not treated as a separate ‘issue’ or ‘message;’ rather is it a continual part of the narrative. The play steers away from a heavy handed message, and instead represents a world in which AIDS is a fact of life. As Roman also said: ‘[i]n terms of *Rent* ’s representation of HIV positive characters its narrative and structural content and even its genesis, the topic of AIDS seems hard to avoid. In fact AIDS saturates *Rent.* AIDS shapes and influences the plot, and therefore it is important to consider how an audience, and specifically the British audience, comes to be affected by this. Roman comments that in *Rent*: ‘AIDS just is.’ This will be considered under the following broad headings: characters with AIDS and the narrative use of the condition, the language of AIDS, physical embodiment and depiction of AIDS alongside the use of musical form.

*Rent* engaged audiences through its approach to the condition’s effect on its characters, which became a universalising force in its depiction of AIDS. *Rent* has more characters with AIDS, and characters from more diverse ethnic groups and backgrounds to previous works on AIDS which had mostly situated themselves in the world of white middle class gay men. The key characters with AIDS in *Rent* are Roger, Mimi, Collins and Angel, as well as various ensemble characters with AIDS.

*Rent* contains more characters with AIDS than previous plays which labelled themselves as ‘AIDS plays’. The characters in *Rent*, as highlighted by Roman, reflect the demographics hardest hit by AIDS: gay men, women of colour, IV drug users, Latinos and African Americans. Alongside his main characters, Larson paints a wide-ranging picture of people with AIDS across the musical. This works against what Douglas Crimp calls the

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581 Roman, David 1998, p 263.
582 The ensemble in *Rent* take on multiple roles throughout the performance, including a variety of characters with AIDS who appear in the musical numbers ‘Will I’ and ‘Life Support,’ and alongside members of the community during ‘La Vie Boheme.’
583 Roman, David p 263.
‘preponderance of AIDS as a gay disease,’ which Crimp believes underscored cultural depictions and understanding of AIDS. Larson’s work begins a move away from this. The balance of HIV negative characters in Rent is also significant. Of the central characters, four are HIV negative: Mark, a straight white man; Benny, a straight African-American man; Maureen, a bisexual white woman; and Joanne, a lesbian African American woman. The variety of characters, their nationalities and sexual orientations reflects the multicultural nature of New York. Although the mix of ethnicities is skewed towards New York’s demographics, London’s own multicultural make-up means this diverse range of characters is easily transposed.

The musical form influences character development and depiction in Rent. The means of creating a character is in some ways altered in the musical format compared with in a play. Characters are developed and defined through their musical numbers, and musical identity. This adds another layer to traditional characterisation. On top of their clothing, appearance, relationships the music sung by a character in a musical further develops their characters. This was particularly pertinent given Rent’s sung-through format, where there was little dialogue for the characters to be developed in, therefore the musical numbers, and musical identity of the characters are integral to character development and the subsequent depiction of AIDS.

Roger, replacing Rodolfo in the original Boheme, is the romantic lead. He is a musician, and a former drug addict. In the opening song we are told he is ‘just coming back from half a year of withdrawal,’ and learn that his girlfriend April has died, committing suicide after finding out she had AIDS: ‘His girlfriend April left a note saying we’ve got AIDS before slitting her wrists in the bathroom.’ This explanation of Roger’s story, which happens in the opening of Rent, is a harsh, almost brutal, introduction for the audience to the character’s situation and to the depiction of AIDS, and is the first mention of the condition. Roger also demonstrates a departure from the previous models of characters with AIDS on stage. Overwhelmingly these had been white middle class gay men. Roger is heterosexual, thereby presenting a challenge to one stereotype, the gay man with AIDS - though admittedly perpetuating another stereotype as a drug addict. As a protagonist, Roger is problematic;

585 Larson, Jonathan, ‘Tune up #1’ Rent, 1996.
586 Ibid.
however, what Larson does achieve through the character is an expansion of the depictions of AIDS previously seen on stage.

Roger’s love interest Mimi is also potentially an unsympathetic character, a dancer at an S&M club and a drug addict. The audience is not given information on how Mimi contracted AIDS, but the combination of her employment and drug habits (not to mention cultural stereotypes on such issues) perhaps do little to elicit sympathy for her predicament. Again, as a female character, she offers an alternative to the predominantly gay males depicted in AIDS dramas. Mimi is also Latin American, another demographic that was neglected in previous works. In Britain, Mimi’s ethnic origin would not have had as much resonance as in New York, given that London has a considerably smaller Latin population than New York. But the character diversity of Larson’s musical was as significant in London as in New York in presenting an ethnic diversity rarely seen in theatre, particularly musical theatre.

Angel is one half of the second couple in Rent to have contracted AIDS, and it is significant that s/he is a transvestite. Previous dramas had been keen to ‘normalise’ the gay men they depicted, making them perhaps more palatable to straight middle class audiences who formed the majority of theatre patronage, at least on Broadway. In Britain the sight of a character in drag may in fact be less shocking to an audience than in America. The British theatrical tradition of the dame in pantomime, and of drag acts in prominent entertainment and theatrical roles, means that the idea of a man dressed as a woman in theatre is not completely alien. Angel appears to be posited by Larson as a transvestite rather than a drag queen, however, which is important: he is not simply dressing as a woman for entertainment such as the work of British drag artist Danny LaRue or Paul O’Grady’s Lily Savage, both of whom perform drag acts for entertainment. Angel, rather, is in the vein of comedian Eddie Izzard, who is a transvestite but also incorporates this facet of his

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587 The ‘Dame,’ a version of a drag queen, or a man dressed as a woman ostentatiously for entertainment purposes (OED) is a tradition in British Pantomime. Taylor, Millie, British Pantomime Performance, Intellect, London, 2009, contains more detailed analysis of this.

588 Angel appears always in female clothing, is referred to as ‘her’ by her friends and partner, therefore is the definition of transvestite that is a person, typically a man, who derives pleasure from dressing in clothes appropriate to the opposite sex (OED) rather than for drag queen a man who ostentatiously dresses up in women’s clothes. (OED).

589 Danny LaRue was an Irish-born British drag act. He performed extensively across Britain in the 1960s, and he was among Britain’s highest-paid entertainers.

590 Lily Savage, the alter ego of Paul O’Grady, began life as a club act playing for eight years at the Vauxhall Tavern in London. Moving on from this, Savage became a television presenter.

591 Eddie Izzard, a transvestite, has performed his stand-up comedy in drag for most of his career. He also talks
personality into his act. I would argue that the long standing tradition of the pantomime Dame, and these popular British entertainers, indicates that in Britain, Angel’s appearance as a transvestite was less controversial than in New York. Although Angel is not a drag queen or dame, the familiarity of such tropes in British theatre means Angel as a character is not necessarily as controversial or alienating as he may first seem. In theatrical tradition, however, Angel is more comparable to Albin in Harvey Feirstein’s *La Cage Aux Folles*,592 who, while using drag for entertainment as Angel does593 is also a transvestite; the use of women’s clothing is an integral part of his identity.594 For both Angel in *Rent* and Albin in *La Cage Aux Folles*, their status as transvestites may be difficult for audiences to accept in American theatrical culture; however, British theatrical tradition dictates this would be a more familiar trope to audiences.

The use of Angel as a drag queen, along with his relationship with Collins, adds an element of queering the text (in relation to the Puccini original Larson works from) and presenting queer theatre within the mainstream commercial context. In so doing, Larson’s work is corresponding to Alexander Doty’s description of queer as a ‘quality related to any expression that can be marked as contra-, non-, or anti-straight.’595 Larson’s text may be read as ‘queered’ in several ways, but the use of Angel as a transvestite character in a central role is particularly significant in relation to depicting AIDS. Larson is not the first to do this within musical theatre, as the example of *La Cage Aux Folles* above indicates. However, *La Cage*, in London at least, was troubled by the associations of gay lives and AIDS. Therefore the presentation of such ‘queered’ images on stage was problematic for producers and audiences. In the case of *La Cage*, the associations were perhaps too close. This shows the effect that AIDS had on wider cultural depictions of gay people. In *La Cage*, where previously there had been more of a tacit acceptance of drag in British culture, the unapologetic gay couple, including one in drag proved too much in the face of AIDS. This put *Rent* in a problematic position: while previously drag on stage had been accepted in

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592Harvey Feirstein’s *La Cage Aux Folles* (1983) depicts a French Rivera Cabaret run by extravagant Drag Queen Albin. Although Albin appears in drag for much of the text and therefore may be considered a transvestite, the emphasis is on the performative element of drag within the nightclub.

593 Angel is a street performer and his costumes often have a performative element to them; he appears as Santa Claus and ‘Pussy Galore’ from James Bond during the course of the play.

594 A central plot of *La Cage aux Folles* is Albin’s son’s rejection and ultimate acceptance of his father’s drag wearing.

Britain, *La Cage* had already showed that depictions of gay couples, especially including one in drag, were problematic now against the backdrop of AIDS.

In presenting an audience with a man in drag, fully accepted within the world of the play and with no added explanation, Larson presents the audience with a transvestite in a way that is less threatening than they might find it in the real world. As Bruce Wilshire points out, social and performance conventions are such that an audience can accept things, in this case discursive gender identities, on stage that they would not in the ‘real world.’*596* Larson’s presenting of non-binary genders is therefore contributing to a queering of theatre - and also an opening up of the queer demographic previously depicted by AIDS plays. The queered text is important in confronting an audience with issues around AIDS and gay people.

Different to the inherently queer text *Angels,* in queering the text of *La Boheme,* Larson challenges audiences by playing on cultural expectations of the source text. It was, as noted with *La Cage,* a risky endeavour in the theatrical climate of the time.

Angel’s gender identity isn’t discussed explicitly in *Rent,* and although s/he appears in drag throughout much of the play, *597* it is not explicitly stated whether Angel considers her/himself to be a drag queen or a transvestite. However, the one use of pronoun in relation to Angel uses the feminine; *598* therefore it can be assumed this is what Larson intended for the character. My personal reading of Angel is that he is a gay man who performed drag and adopted it in some facets of everyday life, but does not appear to be transsexual, but given the nature of the piece there is some ambiguity around this. However no matter which way an audience chooses to read Angel, his/her appearance is significant. Angel is therefore a complex queer character and important in Larson’s depiction of gay identity and in relation to AIDS.

Larson queers the source text of *Boheme,* and presents a character in drag as a powerful tool in his AIDS narrative. Following Butler’s notions of drag as subversive, Larson may indeed have deliberately left Angel’s choice of gender identification slightly ambiguous to enforce this (to enforce what? It’s subversive nature?). As Butler highlights, drag

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597 Two scenes show Angel out of drag: ‘You Ok Honey’ when Collins and Angel meet, and ‘Contact’ when Angel dies. At the curtain call and during ‘Seasons of Love,’ Angel appears in the same outfit as ‘You Ok Honey.’
598 During Angel’s funeral, Mimi uses ‘she’ in relation to Angel.
challenges notions of fixed and binary gender by illustrating the constructed nature of gendering. Larson challenges cultural expectations through the variety of characters with AIDS; their relationship to one another and to the other characters in the play is an asset in depicting AIDS to British audiences. This is in contrast to plays like Angels and The Normal Heart, which could be perceived as insular in the characters depicted, as they are mainly from the demographic of white middle class gay men. In comparison, the demographics in Rent are wide ranging - not only of those people with AIDS, but in the general ethnic range of characters. The audience does not necessarily share the demographic range depicted by Larson, but the wide tapestry of ethnicities and identities creates a believable reflection of the world in which Larson was writing.

Depicting AIDS across a variety of genders and ethnicities offers an alternative to previous theatrical depictions of AIDS - including Kushner’s. In diversifying those characters with AIDS in Rent, Larson is widening the spectrum of those depictions, which can be seen as a progression in depictions of AIDS on stage. The ethnic diversity of Larson’s writing also sits neatly alongside the queering of the text. Larson was reflecting the world as he saw and experienced it in his writing, and for audiences in the NYTW production this would likely have been the same. As the musical moved up town and to London, however, the audiences changed, and character diversity became part of what Rent presented to theatre audiences and the theatrical landscape. The world the audience is confronted with - the world in which this depiction of AIDS sits - is diverse in every way. It may not be, as noted, the world with which the audience is familiar, but it has diversity in race, gender and sexuality which makes it a believable world created on stage.

The relationships between characters with AIDS and the effect of AIDS on their relationships in Rent are a driving force in the narrative. It is in fact the centre of Larson’s account of AIDS. As Poz magazine described:

By facing AIDS as yet another of life’s uncertainties, Rent’s HIV positive pairings love each other with a sexual passion that not only turns on Broadway audiences but brings them to their feet.

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600 Eads, Stefani, Poz, August/September 1996 quoted in Roman, p 272.
The centre of Larson’s plot is formed from the ways in which its two central couples, one gay, one straight, deal with their AIDS diagnoses, and how it affects their lives and relationships. The relationship between Collins and Angel is significant in its depiction of characters with AIDS. Collins and Angel’s treatment in the story, and the development of their romantic relationship in the face of AIDS, is given equal time and treatment as the heterosexual love affair between Roger and Mimi. Larson presents a far more balanced text in terms of those affected by AIDS than previous works that centred on the gay male experience. In depicting Roger and Mimi’s experience, Larson is widening the demographic beyond those groups already addressed in other works. Though Larson cannot hope to encompass the spectrum of all those affected by AIDS, his work goes some way to widening that depiction in theatrical works.

4.2.2 Depictions of the medical and AIDS

The musical theatre form is perhaps more prohibitive to depicting AIDS in a more realistic or graphic manner. The stylistic approach of the genre, and in particular the ‘representational’ style of Rent as discussed earlier, does not lend itself to an in-depth realistic depiction of AIDS. While in Angels the style of the production, and in particular, the intimate setting of the Cottesloe theatre, allowed for a degree of realism. In addition, Kushner’s style of writing allowed for a degree of medical detail and realism that is not possible within Rent’s sung-through musical theatre style.

Therefore the depiction of AIDS in physical or medical terms in Rent takes a different form to its predecessors in performance. In a stylistic choice which fits with the style of musical theatre, Michael Grief’s direction of Larson’s piece does not rely on details, instead using minimalist set and props to give an impression or overview. This complements Larson’s writing style, which in its sung-through approach leaves much of the detail unsaid. The minimal style extends to the depictions of AIDS, which do not dwell on the overt medical symptoms of AIDS in the way that other dramas had. Larson here again can be viewed as drawing on the influence of Sontag; he is looking at the social effect and perceptions of the disease, rather than the actual medical details. As Sontag highlights in both

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601 A sung-through musical refers to a musical where dialogue is either minimal or non-existent and narrative is developed entirely through song. This is a divergence from other forms of musical theatre in which scenes are punctuated by songs that embellish what is happening in the scene.
her work on AIDS and previous work on cancer, it is at times the social and cultural perceptions of a disease that are more difficult for a sufferer to deal with than the physical implications. Larson, as noted above, cites Sontag as an influence on his work. It appears, therefore, that his skirting of the physical detail of AIDS in favour of an exploration of the social effects of the condition is a deliberate effort to force audiences to confront the kinds of ‘metaphors’ and connotations that Sontag discusses.

The point at which Angel’s condition begins to worsen is an example of this. The signposting of his imminent death takes place first as part of a backdrop to other aspects of the story, then as a surreal dream-like sequence. The musical number ‘Contact,’ in which Angel dies, is the only traditionally choreographed dance or movement number in Rent. The other actors move around as Angel’s death is enacted (rather than realistically as Roy’s was in Angels), creating a stylised, self-consciously theatrical piece. This artistic decision from Larson and Greif moves away from the realism of pieces like Angels or the previous drawn-out bedside dramas of other texts dealing with AIDS.

There are examples of the musical theatre format taking a more realistic approach to depicting AIDS. In Falsettoland, for example, the work closest to Rent in form and content, the depiction of AIDS follows theatrical realism more in the vein of that seen in Angels. The approach taken by Falsettoland, however, would not be conducive to Larson’s artistic approach. Larson’s approach is more stylised. As in Kushner’s work, Rent features Brechtian elements of the set, and its direction breaks the fourth wall at intervals. This creates a stylistic focus that is not in keeping with graphic realism; indeed the violence inflicted upon Collins, for example, is stylised choreography rather than realistic stage violence. This use of a highly stylised, choreographed element is again fitting with musical theatre style and form. Although Rent does not use traditional musical theatre dance choreography, it remains a choreographed piece. The movement and performance in Rent are driven by the music and there are numerous moments of stylised movement pieces throughout. This is indicative of an artistic choice to engage in a particular style of musical theatre where stylised movement replaced traditional choreography or dance, but still gives the

Finn, William, Falsettoland, 1990. Follows central character Marvin and the impact of his AIDS diagnosis. Although in the musical format, the acting, design and direction are that of naturalism, and therefore more in keeping with the other plays mentioned than with Rent, which takes a less naturalistic and therefore less graphic or literal approach to depicting AIDS.

Most notably, Larson breaks the fourth wall during ‘Seasons of Love,’ when the cast sing independent of the storyline to the audience. In addition, Mark’s narration can be viewed as a breaking of the fourth wall.
piece a look and feel that is slightly removed from realism. Therefore, Larson’s approach focuses on a stylised production that expresses the effect of AIDS on characters through means other than the physical depiction of illness. Larson focuses instead on communicating the effect of AIDS through song and the characters’ emotional responses.

The audience sees two characters being physically affected by AIDS in the course of the performance: Angel during ‘Without You’ and Mimi during ‘Your Eyes/Finale B.’ Neither of these is a graphic portrayal, as both actors give little more than the impression of being weakened by their illness. Again the symbolic gestures associated with the illness are more significant to Larson than realistic depiction. In both cases, the person affected is cared for and literally carried by their lover, Angel by Collins and Mimi by Roger, as symbolic gesture again takes precedence over realism. The mirroring in the staging of Collins and Roger carrying their dying lover draws attention to their shared experience as people with AIDS, but also to Larson’s equal treatment of the characters regardless of sexuality.

Angel’s death is acted out across two musical numbers, and is a departure from the expected illness narrative of a dramatic, emotional deathbed scene. In ‘Without You,’ there is a more traditional, emotive lament. The emotion of Angel’s death is still felt in ‘Without You.’ from the beginning of this number, as Mimi and Roger fight, Angel is seen dressed in white pyjamas, lying on a table covered with a white sheet. It becomes apparent Angel’s health has deteriorated; he is seen (as dictated by stage directions) coughing, with Collins attending to him, picking him up and carrying him the length of the stage before lying next to him on another table. As he does so, Mimi laments ‘Without you, The moon glows, The river flows, But I die without you.’ This brings home to the audience the emotional resonance of Angel’s death. The movements and performance at this point are slightly stylised yet still gives a strong indication of the physical toll the AIDS has taken on Angel.

In ‘Contact,’ which directly follows ‘Without You,’ Angel, dressed in white, is surrounded by members of the company. They wrap him in a sheet and take part in a ‘sensual life and death dance’ (as Larson described it in his stage directions). The other actors speak words of passion before Angel emerges upstage of the sheeted group. A clearly metaphoric approach to Angel’s death, Larson uses the words of the accompanying musical number once again to communicate and depict ideas about AIDS clearly. In sensual sounding language

605 Larson, ‘Contact,’ Rent, 1996.
such as ‘Touch! Deep! Dark! Kiss! Beg! Slap! Fear! Thick!’ Larson equates the sexual element of AIDS with the bodily implications of AIDS. Angel’s death musically becomes more an ascent as the music reaches a climax, singing:

Take me
Take me
Today for you
Tomorrow for me
Today me
Tomorrow you
Love
You
Love you
I love you
I love you I love you
Take me
Take me
I love you

The crescendo of the music and the words of the sexual dialogue of ‘Contact’ melds into Angel’s dying lament. Angel ends sings euphorically on these notes as the music swells; and his words are then echoed by the company, with the repetition of the words ‘It’s over’ signals his death and the true meaning of the song. Collins’s final word, ‘It’s over,’ segues the music into a refrain from their love song, ‘I’ll Cover You.’ The emotional effect and wider social commentary, the link between sexual expression and death caused by AIDS, is achieved here without the use of graphic medical depictions. The following funeral scene and the effect on Collins and the other characters are, as already explored, emotionally powerful. The graphic depiction of the exact physical implications of Angel’s illness is therefore redundant in making Larson’s point here.

The only other character the audience sees physically affected by AIDS is Mimi. The deterioration of her condition is kept off stage by Larson in the time lapse between Halloween and Angel’s funeral (when Mimi is said to be going to rehab) and Christmas Eve when she is found unconscious in the park by Maureen and Joanne. The shift from Mimi’s previously healthy appearance to being close to death provides the emotional climax of Rent without Larson having to deal with the medical details. Much has been made of Mimi’s ‘miraculous’ recovery; Larson maintained that Rent was to be about life rather than

606 Ibid.
607 In ‘Goodbye Love,’ Mimi says ‘I’m scared. I need to go away.’ Mark replies, ‘I know a place - a clinic.’ (Larson, ‘Goodbye Love’, Rent, 1996.) Benny then offers to pay for Mimi’s stay. She exits, and it is assumed that she goes to the clinic, at least temporarily during the time lapse between scenes.
death, which explains his dramatic reasoning for this. Mimi’s death and resurrection are
dramatic and sentimental; she wakes after being serenaded by Roger, claiming a vision of
Angel brought her back. She says: ‘I was in a tunnel. Heading for this warm, white light […]
and I swear Angel was there—and she looked good. And she said “Turn around girlfriend and
listen to that boy’s song…”’ Mimi is brought back both by the love Roger conveys in his
song and a vision of her best friend Angel. Clearly this is a romanticised and unrealistic
depiction of AIDS, particularly as we are told moments earlier that Mimi has been living
rough and presumably therefore not receiving any treatment. However the details of the
medical implications of AIDS are not Larson’s key concern in his depiction of AIDS. What
Larson seeks to represent is the community response to AIDS, and how friendships and
romantic relationships endure and even flourish in the face of AIDS. It is for this reason that
he insists Mimi lives in Rent.

Wollman refers to this ‘miraculous recovery’ in her analysis of Rent, noting it is one
of Larson’s departures both from musical theatre and source material traditions. It is in
keeping also with the overall positive attitude of Rent. In Mimi’s recovery, Larson utilises the
depiction of community seen in his and other musicals. Drawing on Kirle’s work on
Broadway musicals, Rent can be viewed as working to the model laid down by Oklahoma in
which the authors ‘mythologize community and the unification, acceptance, and tolerance of
all who agreed by the social contract.’ Within the social contract both of Larson’s imagined
community on stage, and that of the audience ‘in residence,’ that which he depicts becomes
an agreed, mythologized version of the reality it draws on. It is not in the stylistic nature of
Rent to present an audience with the kind of medical details about AIDS they were perhaps
used to from either television dramas, or even the kind of slower paced exploration of the
effects on characters physically as well as mentally that other AIDS dramas were inclined
towards.

Larson does create a world where these references are that of those accustomed to the
condition. Again, we come back to the point that AIDS just ‘is’ for these characters, and they
do not interrogate its existence or dwell overtly on medical facts, instead commenting on the
effects, which creates an emotional connection with the audience. This actually helps Rent’s

610 Kirdle, Bruce, Unfinished Business; Broadway Musicals as Works in Progress, Southern Illinois University Press; 1st edition, 2005, Chapter 4, p 84.
translation to a British stage. Recalling Jones’s introduction to her work on ‘Second Generation’ AIDS plays, the language of Rent has moved away from the issue of the medical in favour of talking around its wider effects, allowing for humour, satire or, in Larson’s case, song. Our connection with Rent therefore comes from an emotional rather than medical understanding, and this offers a far stronger chance of transatlantic translation.

4.2.3 Language and AIDS

Larson approaches the language of AIDS differently to his predecessor which, it is argued, assists the ability of British audiences to connect more fully to the play. Due to the significant differences in the experience of the AIDS epidemic between Britain and America, and the differences between health service provisions, the medical language of AIDS in other dramas has the potential to become alienating to British audiences. In addition, the time delay between Rent’s setting and its staging in Britain increases the potential for alienation, as medical advances and political changes make the references to AIDS more distant from the audience. Rent does not avoid this completely. However, what Rent does do in its language and its depiction of AIDS as a condition, is present it in such a way that it becomes relatable to almost all audiences, in this case the British audience. The most potential for alienating a British audience comes in these medical references, where previous AIDS dramas have struggled in Britain. Medical terminology and experience differed greatly between Britain and America and changed frequently. In the third edition of Policing Desire, Simon Watney’s account of the British media and AIDS, Watney recounts the vast difference between the medical situation in Britain when he began writing in 1987 and when the third edition was published in 1996. The impossibility of keeping up with medical changes meant

612 The main difference in health service provisions between American and Britain is the privatised nature of the American health service, which differs greatly in terms of access and availability of treatment to Britain’s National Health Service. As outlined in the introduction, this was a key difference in the experience of AIDS in each country.
613 The action of Rent is set in 1989, around the time Larson began work on the text. This was not made explicit in either the original Broadway Production of the Original London production The date was included in the film, in which Mark’s opening voiceover states ‘December 24th 1989, 9pm Eastern Standard Time,’ replacing the stage version’s, ‘December 24th, 9pm, Eastern Standard Time.’ The date has since become accepted, and in some productions is incorporated into the accompanying video projections of Mark’s film, both in the opening scene and at the end of the play, set a year later.
that his work was always out of date almost before it was published. Larson’s musical faces the same problem, amplified by its transfer overseas.

In *Rent*, AIDS is a clear and constant presence without becoming overbearing in either a ‘political’ or ‘educational’ manner. It becomes a central issue in the text because it is of central importance to the characters, and an audience becomes aware of the disease through its effects on the characters’ lives rather than through heavy handed or direct address. For Larson, AIDS is engrained in the world he is depicting, and his language reflects this. Instead of detailed descriptions or medical analysis, there are fleeting references to AIDS throughout the text. This is a reflection of the style of the piece and does not, as explored in relation to the emotional element of AIDS in *Rent*, lessen its effectiveness as a piece of AIDS drama.

It is of note that the depictions of the medical aspects of AIDS in *Rent* were already outdated when it was staged, as unlike *Angels* it was not an explicitly historical piece. The criticism is largely related to the treatment depicted for AIDS. In *Rent*, the characters are shown taking the drug AZT\(^\text{615}\) but the drug was slightly outdated as a means of AIDS treatment by 1996. The fast paced changes to understanding AIDS across the early 1990s, and the subsequent changing treatments, mean that any text dealing with AIDS struggled to keep up. Nevertheless, this inaccuracy or anachronism in medical depiction is not viewed as a detraction from *Rent*’s influence and reception as a text on AIDS. As previously explored, the world of *Rent* is so permeated with the effects of AIDS that it is almost intrinsically interwoven to the point that an audience may overlook it. However, the manner in which the characters talk about their condition can be used to assess *Rent*’s significance, and also how the play may communicate effectively with a specifically British audience on this issue. As with the ability of audiences in Britain to understand the medical references to AIDS, there is a level of assumption here on the part of the creative team that these outdated references will be understood. As mentioned throughout, the less detailed approach of *Rent* and the emphasis on the emotional impact of AIDS allows such assumptions to be made with confidence by the creative team. They clearly assumed that there would be minimal impact on the power of

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\(^{615}\) Used to delay development of AIDS AZT belongs to a group of drugs known as nucleoside reverse transcriptase inhibitors (NRTIs). In 1987 AZT became the first of these drugs to be approved by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration for the purpose of prolonging the lives of AIDS patients. <www.britannica.com>, [Accessed 30th October, 2013.] Further details on AZT and other drugs for HIV/AIDS can be found at <www.avert.org> or www.tht.org.uk>
Rent in depicting AIDS regardless of outdated references or a lack of prior knowledge on the part of the audience.

These references peppered across the text, act as subtle reminders of the condition that the characters are living with, rather than Larson taking time to provide details of AIDS in the text. There is also an expectation that at this stage in the history of AIDS, the audience will have a sufficiently basic awareness or enough basic knowledge of AIDS as a condition to understand the medical references, at least in the broadest sense. In keeping with this, Rent is rarely overt in its medical references to AIDS. This is in part, due to its musical format, which does not allow for much exposition; but also, because medical terms generally do not lend themselves to rhymed dialogue. Furthermore, the sung-through approach also does not allow for as detailed a medical exposition as other AIDS musicals like Falsettoland which incorporated song with dialogue, or AIDS plays like Angels which had more capacity for detailed accurate medical description. The references which are present, therefore, are used for a specific narrative purpose and also provide medical shorthand for both the condition and the period in which it is set. For example, one member of the ‘Life Support’ group that Angel takes Collins and Mark to, notes: ‘My t-cells are low I regret that news.’616 ‘Life Support’ was the support group for people with AIDS, and by using them in the musical, Rent reminds an audience that it comes from an informed stance about AIDS but does not need to be heavy handed in its medical references.

This effect is seen also in Mimi’s reference to an ‘AZT Break.’617 The British audience would be unlikely to be familiar with the specific drug as its use was more limited in the UK, and largely discontinued by this point; however the implication of having to take the medication, and the further implications about the impact of AIDS on the characters’ lives would be understood. In being less medically specific, by giving AZT only a couple of passing direct references,618 the implications are suggested rather than dwelt on with details that would become outdated and therefore alienating. The key means by which Larson avoids an alienating effect is his use of music to address character’s response to AIDS and elicit a response from the audience.

This is shorthand for the development of his condition - level of T-cells being an indicator for AIDS status as well as a general indicator of health.
617 Larson, ‘I Should Tell You,’ Rent, 1996, as noted, this refers to AZT, one of the first medications used to treat HIV, which had to be taken at regular intervals throughout the day.
618 In ‘Tune up #3,’ Mark also instructs Roger to ‘take his AZT,’ and during ‘La Vie Boheme,’ the song references AZT. Larson, Rent, 1996.
The first song to address a character’s emotional response to AIDS is Roger’s rock ballad lament, ‘One Song Glory.’ Performed early in the musical as the second major musical number, it sets the tone for Roger’s character and his response to AIDS. At this point the audience knows that Roger is a musician and former drug addict who has AIDS. His song—sung after he refuses to accompany Mark out—is his lament, seated on the table in their apartment, accompanying himself on guitar. It is about unfulfilled promise as a musician, but also serves to illustrate his thoughts about his condition. He sings, ‘Find one song, before the virus takes hold’⁶¹⁹ and ‘One song to leave behind.’⁶²⁰ He sings both about needing to leave an artistic legacy and a longing for personal fulfilment in what he knows will be limited time. In ‘One Song Glory,’ Larson illustrates the frustration of young people with AIDS: the idea of ‘another empty life,’ and the idea that ‘time flies - time dies,’ emphasising the plight of people whose lives were being cut short.

This scene provides a good example of the musical theatre form allowing Larson to engage with an audience, and so communicate the depiction of AIDS in a powerful way. Through music, Roger communicates emotions more difficult to express in spoken word. It is the nature of the musical format to allow characters to voice their emotions more strongly or poignantly through song. In this example Larson uses Roger effectively to convey this, singing about the importance of music to him as his legacy, and simultaneously communicating his desperation at his illness to an audience through song.

In contrast to Roger’s approach in ‘One Song Glory,’ Mimi’s attitude to her own life and having AIDS is quite different, as illustrated in ‘Out Tonight.’ Echoing Roger’s ‘Time flies,’ Mimi sings ‘Get up-life too quick,’ summarising her attitude in this number. Mimi implores Roger to take her ‘out tonight;’ she is intent on winning Roger over and enjoying her night. Her plans or intentions do not extend much beyond the present as she declares, ‘in the evening I’ve got to roam’ while dancing. This is in contrast to Roger’s subdued lament for his lost life and legacy. Mimi is intent on existing in and enjoying the here and now, wanting to ‘find a bar so dark we forget who we are.’ Her behaviour clearly is a means to forget her situation, and it may be argued that it is as equally unhealthy as Roger’s response. What Larson does in Mimi’s song, however, is present an example of one for whom life does not simply stop at an AIDS diagnosis.

⁶²⁰ Ibid.
This is a theme Larson maintains across other musical numbers. Having explored the beginnings of Collins and Angel’s relationship and the significance of AIDS in it, the ‘love song’ they sing also makes reference to AIDS. The song ‘I’ll Cover You’ secures their relationship, but also makes a statement about living with AIDS in Larson’s text. While Mimi and Roger are still coming to terms with their feelings for one another, Collins and Angel are declaring their love, illustrating in this song that love and AIDS are not mutually exclusive categories. The song is a sweet promise to each other with lyrics such as, ‘You’ll be my king and I’ll be your castle’ or ‘You’ll be my Queen and I’ll be your moat.’ The sentimentality of the lyrics aside, however, the song also acknowledges the situation they’re in. This also foreshadows their future somewhat. Both singing, ‘All my life I’ve longed to discover something as true as this is’ is a bittersweet declaration given their situation. They sing this while walking down the street together arm in arm or hand in hand, ending on a kiss. This unashamed declaration of their love is important for Larson’s depiction of both homosexuality and AIDS. This was the first kiss between two men in an American musical; and the unapologetic depiction of a gay relationship in what became a mainstream musical is as important for depictions of homosexuality in theatre as it is for AIDS.

By depicting AIDS but showing a romance that is not halted by AIDS, Larson makes a statement of defiance against the previous perceptions of the impact AIDS would have. Other plays had often depicted the struggles and the untimely demise of relationships; none had shown a relationship beginning and strengthening. This somewhat idyllic, romantic scene is bookended by Collins singing, ‘When you’re worn out and tired, when your heart has expired’ - indicative of the loss they know will probably await them. The poignancy of Collins repeating these lyrics at Angel’s funeral during the reprise of the song is heightened by their use at the otherwise optimistic start of the character’s relationship. The three songs highlighted here illustrate the three facets of relationships between the romantic leads, and their differing attitudes to their own diagnoses of AIDS. The use of musical theatre form comes into play here again, by using the musical refrain of repeated music. This repetition of musical signatures serves an emotional cue for audiences connecting to the narrative of Angel and Collins, and their experience with AIDS. The change in meaning of the musical number ‘I’ll Cover You’ from a sweet love ballad to a eulogy gives the moment an additional emotional resonance through the power of the musical refrain.

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621 Larson, ‘I’ll Cover You,’ Rent, 1996.
622 Ibid.
As highlighted in the previous analysis of Larson’s narrative, Mark and Roger’s relationship is equally significant in *Rent*’s dealing with AIDS; likewise the musical number that addresses this, ‘What You Own,’ is important to Larson’s communication with the audience. In ‘What You Own,’ Mark and Roger, who separated after Roger left to move to Santa Fe, vent their frustrations with the world around them and each other. Both lament the other’s artistic problems, with Roger singing, ‘The filmmaker cannot see’ and Mark echoing, ‘And the songmaker cannot hear.’ During this song, we also hear the phrase ‘I don’t own emotion, I rent,’ linking back to the musical’s title and the several meanings of ‘rent’ (relating both to temporality and tearing apart - as noted earlier in the chapter). For Roger and Mark, the emotions surrounding their friendship are always temporary given Roger’s condition. Larson echoes here Mark’s earlier comment that, ‘[m]aybe it’s because I’m the one of us to survive.’

Through the two friends, Larson is again highlighting the effects of AIDS and its emotional effect on all relationships, not just the romances at the centre of his narrative. Roger and Mark sing, ‘When you’re living in America at the end of the Millennium, you’re what you own,’ illustrating the feelings of isolation and loneliness they feel at their respective losses and frustration. By the end of the song, however, they are discovering what has held them back - Roger declaring ‘I hear it my song!’ while Mark sings ‘I see it my film.’ ‘They come together to sing ‘When you’re dying in America at the end of the Millennium, you’re not alone, I’m not alone.’ The adjective may be of the negative, of dying, but the sentiment is far more positive: to have a community, specifically in this case their friendship, is far more important than the commercial America they feel has rejected them. Once again, the idea that Mark and Roger’s friendship is as vital to Roger’s survival as Mimi is confirmed by this number.

The lyrics in a musical are the means through which issues are discussed; and these songs, though not directly about AIDS, actually represent the characters discussing and dealing with their condition. In this context the musical theatre form is creating an emotional connection that is distinct from the way a play functions. In a musical there is often a stronger emphasis on the emotional with songs designed as expressions of extreme emotion that couldn’t be spoken in conventional dialogue. As with the predecessor of the musical theatre form, opera, which is in the case of *Rent* a direct predecessor of the story, music offers an exaggerated account of emotion. Through music and song emotions are expressed in a

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heightened manner which also serves to try and connect an audience with the extremes of emotion expressed. Music can be a powerful tool and causes strong reactions in listeners. In expressing the emotional impact for the characters, using powerful musical accompaniment, *Rent* uses this musical format to seek empathy and emotion from the audience in relation to the depiction of AIDS.

In his depiction of the emotional fallout in relation to AIDS, Larson is making a conscious decision to move away from the more educationally and politically led theatrical discourses that preceded him. This does not detract from *Rent’s* power as a depiction of AIDS, and moreover the approach, which uses emotional effects and empathy, may offer an audience a greater understanding of the implications of AIDS than using medical details. In transposing the text outside its native country, the universality of themes in *Rent* also becomes significant, and as explored here, the narrative’s approach helps to minimise the possibility of alienating a British audience.

### 4.2.5 Emotional Impact and AIDS

These three relationships - Mimi’s with Roger, Collins’s and Angel, and the platonic relationship between Roger and Mark depict the emotional impact of AIDS. This means that once the audience moves past the nature of the illness, they move into thinking only about the humanistic element of the text, of the love and loss. It could be argued this is a reduction, or to follow what Douglas Crimp terms a ‘normalisation’ of the situation: a move away from AIDS as the unknown, the threatening outsider, to something that is an accepted part of life.

This approach, it is argued, assists the comprehensibility of the depiction of AIDS in *Rent* when viewed by a British audience. I propose that this takes *Rent* out of its specifically American location and the demographics of the East Village, and allows audiences to think in broader terms about the humanistic element of AIDS rather than specific demographics. In addition to this, perhaps Larson’s best narrative and character choice is found in the fact that he gives equal weight to the effect of AIDS on friendship as to the love affairs across the entire group of characters. These are the aspects which will now be considered in relation to the text.

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In *Rent* the couples are driven together and apart by their AIDS diagnosis. For Collins and Angel, AIDS is a sign to grab what they have and the time they have with full force. Their exchange: ‘My body provides a comfortable home, for the Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome,’ ‘As does mine,’ is an offhand reference to establish that they are in the same situation. This acts as a bonding tool for Collins and Angel, their shared AIDS diagnosis meaning it is easier for them to begin a relationship. This is a logical step for many people with AIDS as it seems easier to maintain a relationship with a person who not only does not have to fear infection themselves, but also understands the impact of the condition. Naturally another issue is also the potential, or at the time of *Rent’s* writing, inevitable loss of that person. Roger and Mimi use their illness as a shield from their true feelings: ‘You don’t want baggage without lifetime guarantees.’ In both cases, Larson seems to be using AIDS as a way to talk about the nature of love rather than the nature of disease. Both couples are brought together after discovering their mutual conditions. Their diagnosis does not define or drive their relationship.

Angel and Collins quickly fall for each other. Towards the end of the night that they meet, Angel declares, ‘I’ve been hearing violins all night,’ and answers Collins’s question ‘Are we a thing?’ with ‘Honey, we’re everything.’ Here Angel is committing himself to the relationship with Collins. It is significant that Larson shows two people with AIDS committing to each other, and equally significant that a gay relationship is, in his musical, treated the same way as a straight relationship.

In a queering of the traditional musical format, this gay couple sing a love ballad, cementing their relationship, as is the musical theatre tradition. The ballad ‘I’ll Cover You’ uses the show’s theme of rent/housing as a metaphor for their relationship, singing, ‘Live in my house, I’ll be your shelter, just pay me back with one thousand kisses.’ The relationship between Collins and Angel is an alternative take on the previous AIDS plays and their depiction of gay relationships in the face of AIDS. While previous AIDS plays had dwelt, and reasonably so, on the issues that AIDS brought in already marginalised relationships, *Rent* illustrates that relationships could begin and even flourish in spite of AIDS. Although it may be criticised for continuing to focus on the gay demographic already explored, in *Rent* the

629 Ibid.
balance of having a heterosexual pairing, and the simple fact that gay men were still statistically more likely to be affected by AIDS, means Larson’s approach is balanced.

Angel and Collins depict perhaps an idealised version of a couple living with AIDS. This element could be read as over-romanticised, or simplified. However, their romance, along with Mimi and Roger’s, echoes the source material. Departing slightly from the characters in *Boheme*, Larson deviates from the narrative enough to serve the modernisation. Collins and Angel (unlike Mimi and Roger for whom AIDS acts as a constant barrier to love) love each other in spite of the circumstances. They also appear to live healthily despite their illness, and they are monogamous which means they are not putting others at risk of infection. This can be read as problematic from a political point of view, and even unrealistic that AIDS seemingly does not affect these characters. However, from a narrative point of view, they act as a counterpoint to Mimi and Roger’s fraught relationship. Angel and Collins are a non-threatening, strong image of living with AIDS, a depiction which can confront an audience - whether familiar with the condition or not - and challenge expectations and stereotypes. They also emotionally handle both living and dying with AIDS well. Angel and Collins are pragmatic but also live their lives fully. They are shown embracing support for their condition and thriving from its influence when they attend the ‘Life Support’ group. This philosophy of ‘no day but today’ influences how they live their lives and conduct their relationship. In this case, AIDS informs but does not shape the narrative, permeating but not overriding.

The relationship between Angel and Collins shows an audience that AIDS did not necessarily mean the end of love and relationships for people, despite its ultimate tragic consequences when Angel dies midway through Act 2. Angel’s death and his funeral constitute one of Larson’s most powerful statements on AIDS. The response of Collins and Angel’s friends to his death is a powerful emotional moment in the drama. The connection between the characters and their obvious grief at the loss of Angel is punctuated with Collins’s heartfelt eulogy. Collins stands in the funeral, holding the coat that Angel bought him earlier, before singing a reprise of ‘I’ll Cover You,’ which blends with ‘Seasons of Love.’ The heartfelt lyrics of love exchanged earlier between the two men are transformed by

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630 Seen in Act I, Collins, Angel and Mark attend an AIDS support group, depicted in the song ‘Will I?’
631 Angel dies during ‘Contact’ in Act 2 of *Rent*, following depictions of his condition worsening, with Collins looking after him in ‘Without You.’
632 Angel meets Collins after he has been mugged (‘You Ok Honey?’); later in Act 1, he is seen buying Collins a replacement coat for the coat he lost in the mugging (‘Christmas Bells’).
Larson into expressions of Collins’s grief; the song ends in a repeat of the phrase: ‘Oh Lover I’ll cover you,’ which becomes a lament of mourning instead, transforming their love into grief.

Through Collins and Angel’s relationship, Larson makes a connection between the audiences and AIDS - first with the love and then the grief felt by Collins. By connecting with these characters, the audience also becomes connected to the loss felt at Angel’s death; and through this elicited sympathy, they also form an understanding and empathy for the impact of AIDS. The musical in part becomes an elegy for Angel, and by extension for others lost to AIDS. This is an evolution of William Finn’s AIDS elegy musical, *Elegies for Angels, Punks and Raging Queens* which in its song-cycle format depicted a more simplistic elegy. The use of an ‘elegy’ in music to represent mourning, or lament, is a well-used cultural form. It stands to reason, therefore, that in depicting AIDS in performance, music came to be used as elegy for AIDS. *Rent*, along with William Finn’s other work on AIDS *Falsettoland*, uses musical elegy in the broader sense of the whole musical, and the whole piece acts as elegy, rather than just an individual composition. Within the text a few of Larson’s numbers could be classified as elegy. ‘I’ll Cover You (reprise)’ and ‘Your Eyes’ are both used as elegy for Angel and Mimi respectively. I would argue also that ‘Seasons of Love’ is Larson’s broader musical elegy, but in its use of hopeful music and lyrics, it acts in the same way that Larson’s version of the AIDS play does, operating through hope as well as mourning. Larson is using the musical theatre format as a device for emphasising his depiction of AIDS. In making the connection about emotional elements, rather than overt medical depiction, using these musical forms and cues he is able to emphasise the point. Through this, *Rent* when performed in London, avoids the connotations of the medical differences between America and Britain. These differences will remain inherently within both *Rent* and *Angels*, an audience’s reaction or understanding cannot be gauged in relation to an understanding of these diverse experiences. In emphasising this emotional impact of AIDS, *Rent* avoids some of these complexities in transferring to the British stage.

In terms of depicting AIDS, Larson’s approach with Mimi and Roger is different but equally effective. The audience sees Roger’s AIDS diagnosis from his point of view early in the story, during his song ‘One Song Glory.’ In this song Roger begins with ‘I’m writing one
great song before I…'  

leaving the ‘go’ unsaid for the audience to interpret. Roger’s introduction by Mark previously tells the audience of his AIDS diagnosis so the audience is clear what he is referring to. His lament ends with the refrain: Time flies, And then - no need to endure anymore, Time dies.

At this point Roger appears already resigned to his death. His negativity, and the way he overcomes this attitude, will form the central part of the narrative along with his relationship with Mimi, and with his friends. At this point Roger is pleading emphatically for meaning or direction to his life through his artistic endeavours before he dies, asking for ‘one song before the virus takes hold’ or ‘one song to leave behind.’ The audience begins to see Roger the songwriter or artist, before Roger the drug addict or Roger with AIDS. In Roger, Larson is depicting the desperation and depression surrounding an AIDS diagnosis. The expression of this, the lament about not fulfilling his potential, cleverly posits him in a position most audience members will understand and be empathetic to. The frustration of not achieving what he wishes in life is something that is familiar to most people; and the added facet of his AIDS diagnosis elicits both empathy and sympathy from the audience.

Mimi is introduced as the romantic interest for Roger before the audience learns either of her occupation or her HIV status, which may affect audience perceptions. Mimi and Roger’s relationship, like Collins and Angel’s, is affected by AIDS; and in their relationship, Larson is able to depict AIDS through its emotional impact. Through Mimi and Roger, Larson shows the opposite effect to that seen with Collins and Angel: rather than the seize-the-day mentality that drives Collins and Angel together, the idea of AIDS as a life sentence drives Mimi and Roger apart. Mimi shares a similar attitude to her medical condition as Angel, with a desire to seize the day and wish to lose herself in the moment. She implores Roger to take her ‘out tonight’ and begs: Let’s find a bar, So dark we forget who we are, Where all the scars, From the nevers and maybes die.

Mimi can be seen to encompass the musical’s slogan ‘no day but today,’ in that from her perspective, AIDS does not mean ceasing to live the life she currently has. The mortality

634 Larson, ‘One Song Glory,’ Rent, 1996.
635 Mark in ‘Tune Up #1’ says, ‘Close up? on Roger. His girlfriend April left a note saying we’ve got AIDS before slitting her wrists in the bathroom.’ Larson, Rent, 1996.
636 Larson ‘One Song Glory,’ Rent, 1996.
637 Mimi, based on Puccini/Murger’s own Mimi, a seamstress who in the original succumbs to tuberculosis.
638 Larson ‘One Song Glory,’ Rent, 1996.
that AIDS forces her to face is to be met with an embrace of the life she currently has. There is certainly a darker side to Mimi’s seize the day attitude, however. In ‘Out Tonight,’ we see her imploring Roger to go to a bar, to ‘forget who they are’ and ‘run away’ and to ‘dance in the flames,’ while dancing provocatively and hanging from the raised platform on stage. Her dance is suggestive of her work as an S&M dancer, while her lyrics betray the darker side to Mimi’s psyche, that in living in this manner, for today with no thought of future or consequences, she is masking the reality of her condition and its consequences.

Mimi’s words in both ‘Out Tonight’ and ‘Another Day’ show recognition of limited time but also of a determination to embrace life. Showing a more reflective side to the declarations of seizing the day, she also says ‘I can’t control, my destiny.’ This comment further illustrates the darker side of Mimi’s attitude; the loss of control that AIDS creates in her life is substituted for a seemingly carefree, possibly reckless attitude. Despite this darker side, Larson is using Mimi as a conduit for his key message of ‘no day but today.’ Mimi’s attitude is used across the piece to denote living in the present, in this case in the face of fatal illness, but also as a broader message to his audience. Mimi first uses this in an attempt to convince Roger to take her out. As she says: Forget regret, Or Life is yours to miss, No other road, No other day, No day but today. Despite Mimi’s efforts, Roger rejects her, feeling that his condition means he cannot embark on a relationship with her. He rebukes her with ‘Another time-another place,’ implying that while he is interested, his circumstances prevent it. While Mimi is determined, telling him ‘there’s only yes, only tonight,’ still Roger rejects her, believing he can no longer function in a relationship. He is effectively waiting on his death. He rejects Mimi, saying, ‘Long ago you might’ve lit up my heart, but the fire’s dead - ain’t never gonna start.’ Roger has closed himself off to the possibility of love and life due to his AIDS diagnosis. He laments that ‘It’d be another song, we’d sing another way.’ In a metanarrative on the use of song to discuss AIDS, Larson here draws attention to the different type of musical he would be writing without AIDS.

In the case of Mimi and Roger, their AIDS diagnoses acts as a shield from their true feelings, Roger dismissing Mimi’s advances with ‘Another time, another place,’ while Mimi’s flirtations and cries of going ‘out tonight’ hide her deeper emotional problems that relate both to her AIDS diagnosis and drug addiction. It is only when they reveal their shared

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642 Larson, ‘Another day,’ Rent, 1996.
643 Ibid.
diagnosis that they begin to come together. They first realise their shared condition during ‘La Vie Boheme,’ when they both hear the pagers used to remind them medication is due. Mimi remarks ‘AZT break’ and as they take their medication, they also begin to give in and start their romance. The realisation that they share the AIDS diagnosis allows Roger to give in to his feelings for her. In this, the initial stages of their romance, Larson illustrates a strong message about the constrictions on life - both real and psychological - that AIDS may have.

Mimi and Roger’s romance is not without issue, and while the problems they face as a couple are not necessarily derived from their AIDS diagnosis, they are augmented by it. Mimi’s drug addiction and Roger’s fear that she is cheating are both brought into harsher focus by their shared condition. As Mimi says to Roger as she leaves him: ‘You don’t want baggage without lifetime guarantees, you don’t want to watch me die.’644 This exchange occurs at Angel’s funeral, and indicates the differing reactions of Roger and Mimi to being confronted with a death from AIDS. While Mimi is convinced of the need for love in her life, declaring: ‘I’d be happy to die for a taste of what Angel had, someone to live for, unafraid to say I love you,’645 Roger is more convinced than ever the relationship is futile, telling her, ‘You’ll never share real love until you love yourself. I should know.’646 For Roger and Mimi at this point in the text, it seems that their reaction to their AIDS diagnosis and its impact on their attitude to life and love makes them incompatible.

In juxtaposing this with the power of Collins’s reaction to the loss of Angel at the funeral, Larson supports his message about the significance of love and loss in relation to AIDS over the medical or political facets that have been at the centre of other dramas such as Kramer’s The Normal Heart. Underpinning this emphasis on the emotional facets of AIDS is the harsh reality of facing illness alone that Larson depicts with Mimi’s lament ‘Goodbye love, hello disease,’647 which reinforces Larson’s theme that continuing with life - and love - in the face of disease is most important. Larson portrays Mimi’s loss of Roger as (at?) the start of her decline in health, which leads to the final scene where she is brought, seemingly dying, to Roger in his and Mark’s apartment.

In a move away from the source material in La Boheme, Larson has Mimi come back to life following Roger’s declaration of his love through his song ‘Your Eyes.’ This depiction

of AIDS is a departure from the previous models in which depicting a character’s death from AIDS seemed a central trope, deemed significant in confronting audiences with the reality of the condition. Larson does this with Angel’s death, but in showing Mimi (as well as Roger and Collins) live, he is indicating that people do manage to continue with AIDS. Larson defended his decision saying that Rent was a play about ‘life not death’.648 He wanted to show the danger of death for those with AIDS, but also to demonstrate it is possible to at least temporarily overcome this; and he offers an alternative to the death bed endings of many previous dramas. In Angels, likewise, there is a move towards survival narratives, rather than only depicting death and mourning. Prior survives beyond the narrative of the play, into the epilogue five years later and presumably beyond.

The audience of Angels is left with hope that Prior continues to live, as they are given no certain evidence otherwise. Likewise, Larson at the end of Rent gives an audience hope that Mimi, along with Roger and Collins, will continue to live, in spite of their diagnoses. The inclusion of hope in a text designed to motivate an audience, whether towards further awareness or activism, is important. If an audience is left thinking all is lost, the text is not as effective in engaging, and in particular motivating, an audience. While the audience is aware that it is only a fleeting moment of happiness, and that due to their condition Mimi and Roger in Rent and Prior in Angels will suffer further illness (and that illness will ultimately be fatal), there is at the close of the play still hope. That all of these characters have life and hope at the end of the play motivates the audience towards optimism, and possibly encourages them into action themselves. It is in this way that the emotional core of both plays also feeds the activist political facets of both. The appeal to an audience’s emotions also runs a spectrum of romantic and platonic emotions in Rent, demonstrating to an audience how wide the influence of AIDS could be.

The romantic pairings of Rent form the centre of Larson’s narrative; however he is equally concerned with the effect of AIDS on the community and friendships. This is shown most clearly in the relationship between Mark and Roger. Following the opening number, their conversation sets the tone for their friendship, and the consequences of AIDS upon it. Roger affectionately teases Mark for helping his ex-girlfriend Maureen: ‘You’re such a sucker,’ and sarcastically responds to Mark’s invitation to dinner with ‘zoom in on my empty

wallet. Amid the friendly bantering Mark reveals Roger’s AIDS diagnosis to the audience and then reminds him to take his medication. He goes on to say: ‘I’ll check up on you later. Change your mind. You have to get out of the house.’ His concern for his friend’s well-being is clear from this short exchange. He has taken on the role of carer for his friend following Roger’s loss of April, his previous girlfriend. What Larson also indicates here is the role of friends in caring for people with AIDS. As in Kushner’s depiction of Belize assisting Prior, and the strength of a friendship in caring for those with AIDS, Mark and Roger’s relationship is as significant, if not more so, than the romantic pairings at the centre of the narrative.

The role of Mark here as a caregiver is not over-emphasised by Larson in the narrative but is a subtle message that not only romantic relationships are affected by AIDS. The most telling and perhaps moving exchange between the two to this end comes after Angel’s funeral as Roger prepares to depart for Santa Fe:

Roger: You pretend to create and observe when really you detach from feeling alive.
Mark: Perhaps it’s because I’m the one of us to survive.

In Larson’s depiction here AIDS moves out of the gay or drug-user connotations of the lover’s quarrels and into the profound sadness felt by a young man losing a friend. This differs to other AIDS dramas which had focused on romantic, sexual or familial relationships. Mark and Roger’s resolution at the end of the piece is as powerful as the reunion of the lovers. The audience becomes as emotionally invested in their friendship as they do in the love affairs. In showing this breadth of experiences of AIDS, Rent reaches beyond the demographics previously reached by AIDS drama; and this wide reaching scope also assisted its translation to a British stage. All three relationships focus on the emotional resonance of AIDS. This allows an audience, regardless of personal experience of AIDS, to empathise with the characters.

649 Larson, ‘Tune up #2,’ Rent, 1996.
650 Larson, ‘Tune up #2,’ Rent, 1996.
651 Larson, ‘What you Own,’ Rent, 1996.
652 The majority of AIDS dramas have dealt with the relationships between gay men or their families. A more detailed summary of the themes and topics in drama dealing with AIDS is found in Therese Jones’ introduction to the anthology Sharing the Delirium; Second generation AIDS Plays and Performances, Heinman, London, 1994, and David Roman’s Acts of Intervention Performance Gay Culture and AIDS, Indiana University Press, 1998. Both of these overviews illustrate that few, if any plays dealing with AIDS have centred on the relationship between straight men.
4.2.5 Sexuality and AIDS

*Rent* is open about its characters’ sexual identities without being overtly sexual. This leaves little to discuss in relation to sex and AIDS as depicted by *Rent*. It is clear that Larson’s characters are sexual beings: they are contemporary characters in all respects, and Larson doesn’t appear to deliberately shy away from their sexual identities. The lovers kiss and touch throughout but never move beyond this to any overt depictions of sex on stage such as those seen in *Angels*. These depictions and acknowledgement are enough, however, for Larson to indicate that he is depicting a world where sex endures in the face of AIDS. This acknowledgement of sexuality and sexual characters is important in the depiction of AIDS that *Rent* offers. In the same way that Kushner’s text was working to confront audiences with gay sexuality but also to present gay men as sexual beings in the face of AIDS, Larson does the same with his straight characters as well. In Larson’s text, the endurance of sexuality can be viewed as an extension of the ‘no day but today’ philosophy, that the characters seize the day and act upon their sexual feelings.

Mimi and Roger’s relationship is perhaps the most sexual of relationships between the lovers. Partly because of her occupation, as an S&M club dancer, Mimi is immediately associated with sex, and the taboos of sexuality as she performs. In aligning Mimi with these taboo sexual expressions, Larson draws on Sontag once again. The taboo nature of Mimi’s sexuality is highlighted in both her occupation and her HIV status. Her HIV status has links through cultural association with Mimi as both a drug addict and in her occupation within the sex industry (though there is no indication from Larson her work as a dancer extends to prostitution). Mimi, then, in her drug use and her employment is a prime candidate for cultural judgement of AIDS as punishment. In Mimi’s personal rejection of this and embracing of her sexuality, Larson is rebuking the kinds of cultural judgements and metaphors that Sontag discusses. And in the character of Mimi he is able to do so with force. This again alludes to Sontag’s notion that when AIDS is seen as affecting a ‘risk group,’ it brings back the historical idea that the ‘illness has judged.’  

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Mimi engages with and embraces her sexuality as an expression, and acts in defiance of society’s expectations of her. Mimi’s first musical number, ‘Out Tonight,’ is fuelled with sexuality in both its lyrical content and her performance. Mimi begins by dancing provocatively above Roger on the upper levels of the set’s scaffolding in a variety of sexualised moves. Mimi’s costume also reflects her sexual character; she unwraps a kimono to reveal her PVC trousers, leopard print boots and sheer top. Mimi communicates her sexual intentions in ‘Out Tonight’ through her movement and interaction with Roger. When she moves down to Roger’s level, sharing the table he is sitting on, she strikes a number of sexual poses as she asks him to take her ‘out tonight’ before kissing him as the song ends. Mimi’s overtly sexual moves combine with the song’s lyrics that include ‘I’ll let you take me’ and ‘make me howl tonight.’ These lyrics have clear and explicit sexual meaning; Mimi is obviously not shying away from her sexuality, and it is Roger’s reluctance to engage in this, as a way of removing himself from living life, that Larson uses to extend his ‘no day but today’ metaphor. Larson and Grief are able to make use of the musical theatre format, allowing Mimi’s song and dance to be a natural progression of the scene and a vehicle for conveying these aspects of her character. The use of the song and her erotic dance around Roger progresses the plot through the lyrics and movement and also indicates aspects of her character. Larson is able to show Mimi the S&M dancer at the same time as she sings about her life and outlook due to the musical theatre format Rent is presented in.

Mimi’s dance and lyrics in ‘Out Tonight’ is one of only two overt depictions of sexuality in Rent. The second, a clear and none-too-subtle metaphor for the link between sex, AIDS and death, is found in the musical number ‘Contact.’ The lyrics of the song are clearly sexual:

Hot-hot-hot-sweet-sweat
Wet-wet-wet-red-heat
Hot-hot-hot-sweet-sweat
Wet-wet-wet-red-heat
Please don't stop please
Please don't stop stop
Stop stop stop don't
Please please please please
Hot-hot-hot-sweet-sweat
Wet-wet-wet-red-heat
Sticky-licky-trickle-tickle
Steamy-creamy-stroking-soaking

655 Larson, ‘Contact,’ Rent, 1996.
The overtly sexual lyrics and movement to ‘Contact,’ which is the only clearly choreographed dance number in Rent, depicts sexual acts and sexuality. As this is happening, it becomes apparent that Angel is dying. Dressed in white and physically lifted up by the company Angel sings his portion of the number, as detailed in the section above:

Take me
Take me
Today for you
Tomorrow for me
Today me
Tomorrow you
Tomorrow you
Love you
Love you
I love
You I love
You!
Take me
Take me
I love you

Angel’s swansong is at once a vivid sexual expression and a dying cry. In creating a parallel between sex and Angel’s death from AIDS related illness, Larson is acknowledging the connection and showing defiance in the face of it. This number, the lyrics and performance of Angel’s death seem to say that death and sex may be inextricably linked but this is not preventing characters like Angel living, and therefore having sexual experiences. The linking of the two, in a theatrical sense, also acts as defiance to critics and wider popular culture that might wish for all references or depictions of sexuality to be erased in the face of AIDS.

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656 Ibid.
4.2.6 Politics and AIDS

Larson’s broader attitudes to AIDS and his ideas about how a community should respond to them take a very different approach to previous AIDS plays. While previous plays, particularly *Angels*, take on the political systems and attitudes of the day, Larson reverts to a focus on the community’s response. As Larson said:

In these dangerous times, where it seems the world is ripping apart at the seams, we can all learn how to survive from those who stare death squarely in the face every day and (we) should reach out to each other and bond as a community, rather than hide from the terrors of life at the end of the millennium.

This idea of community responses can be best seen in the numbers ‘Life Support’ and ‘La Vie Boheme.’ In ‘La Vie Boheme,’ the characters sing a declaration of modern bohemian life that echoes freedom of choice, love and - most importantly in terms of Larson’s message - a community. The song lists cultural icons from, as they put it, ‘Sontag to Sondheim,’ as well as declaring their ‘bohemian’ attitudes, including ‘emotion, devotion to causing a commotion.’ The reference here draws on the on-going Sontag influence on Larson’s text. As noted, Larson cites Sontag’s work as influence on *Rent* in his 1992 statement about his concept for the musical. Sontag’s influence drives Larson’s depiction of AIDS in *Rent*. In placing her name next to Sondheim in ‘La Vie Boheme,’ Larson is positing the twin influences on *Rent* side by side. Sondheim was Larson’s key musical influence, while Sontag gave him inspiration for the subject matter. It seems that Sontag’s work helped Larson to articulate his feelings on AIDS, having spent several years surrounded by its impact in 1980s New York. In the same way that Sondheim’s musical theatre helped shape Larson’s musical voice, Sontag’s work shaped *Rent* in terms of content. In placing them side by side in ‘La Vie Boheme,’ in which his character’s name-check influential and trendy figures from their era, Larson is citing the influence on his own work, as well as the world his characters inhabit.

“Amongst the citing of cultural icons and rebellion against suburbia, Larson’s deeper message of community is demonstrated. This is significant in his overall depiction and perhaps message about AIDS. The song ‘La Vie Boheme’ is designed to illustrate an

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alternative manner of living. In so doing emphasises care and togetherness in the community, citing the important ‘compassion’ alongside ‘passion’ and also an inclusive nature that includes ‘bisexuals, trisexuals, homo sapiens.’ The use of these sexual identities, played off against ‘homo sapiens’ as a name for all human beings, indicates Larson’s view on equality regardless of gender or sexuality. While at times flippant, the underlying message of embracing the different strands of community and forming a united, caring community are expressed in this song. The idea of unity and collective social and political spirit that drives Rent is seen here.

The depiction of AIDS, and a political reaction from the audience, is also seen in ‘Will I.’ This is a number sung by the chorus, depicting members of a support group for people with AIDS designed to echo the organisation ‘Friends in Deed’ - which several of Larson’s friends attended. In the musical number, the members of the meeting consider their fears about their illness asking: Will I lose my dignity, Will someone care, Will I wake tomorrow, From this nightmare? Larson here gives voice to the fears of his central characters, and also those with AIDS he was writing about in the broader sense. Larson noted in his script that the names of the people in the support group should change nightly and reflect friends of the company who had died of AIDS related illnesses. In this song there is a departure from and a balance to Larson’s relentless ‘no day but today’ mantra. He acknowledges here the fears of the people affected by AIDS. In this scene, he places Mark, who does not have AIDS, as an observer attending the meeting to film for his documentary and accompany his friends. With Mark serving as narrator, observing what his friends with AIDS go through and joining in this song, Larson maintains his idea of a whole community being affected, and also having a responsibility. This idea is at the centre of Larson’s political, or more accurately philosophical, stance on AIDS.

Political themes in Rent are not as overt or all pervasive with regards to AIDS as some works, such as The Normal Heart, where the primary purpose was to further the political cause of AIDS by drawing attention to inadequacies of care. Angels by comparison has a very different political approach, seeking a broader challenge to the politics of America inclusive of and perhaps motivated by the impact of AIDS. Larson clearly championed the cause of two key agencies that helped people with AIDS, one primarily political, the other primarily

660 Larson, Rent, Stage directions, Rent script NYPL archives, p 43.
caring. The organisation ‘Friends in Deed’ is not referenced directly but is depicted in the ‘Life Support’ group scenes by Larson. The use of such a group in Larson’s text is fitting to depict his political stance or message on AIDS as worthy of community action and caring. For Larson, depictions of love, loss and caring from his characters become a political statement, and one as strong as Kushner’s more overt, specific politics.

Larson’s concern across the text is the ‘personal as political’ stance. The use of the support group as a depiction of groups for people with AIDS is significant to this. Larson places it centrally in his narrative, indicating his thoughts on the importance of such groups to the community he depicts. In so doing, rather than showing the characters involved heavily in activism - as such individuals may well have been - Larson keeps the emphasis the community responsibility of care. There is an innate politics in this, which Larson depicts; and it is not divorced entirely from AIDS activism on a broader spectrum. This approach also translates internationally. In the UK, ACT UP was not as significant an organisation as in America; and British audiences were unlikely to be universally familiar with organisations such as the Terrance Higgins Trust or Stonewall. For Larson, the love and loss, the emotional toll AIDS takes on his characters, is as important in terms of their personal community activism, as joining these organisations could be.

Larson does reference political activism group ACT UP, by relating a story that happens before the narrative of the play begins: when Collins reprogrammed the MIT computers to broadcast ‘ACT UP fight AIDS.’ In this Larson illustrates his support for the political activist side of AIDS awareness without having to integrate it into his play. His characters would have been aware of its existence, perhaps even participated in it, but Larson stays away from the potentially contentious or complicated associations that a more detailed reference to the organisation would hold. Instead, by references to his characters’ political and activism awareness in relation to AIDS, Larson both creates a realistic portrait of the characters’ political sensibilities regarding AIDS, as well as giving a subtle but meaningful facet to his work’s own political dimensions.

The generalised nature of Larson’s politics would have made the piece more accessible to a British audience; the highly specific politics of both Angels and The Normal

661 Founded in 1991, ‘Friends In Deed’ is a network of support organisations for people dealing with life threatening illnesses or death <http://www.friendsindeed.org>
Heart made aspects of both texts difficult for British audiences at times. As noted in Chapter 2, British political activism in relation to AIDS was markedly different to that of America. In Britain, political activism of the same kind was not needed, as the National Health Service and a more proactive approach by government meant that testing and treatment for HIV and AIDS were accessible for all. There was activism in America and Britain around AIDS, usually under the broader activism of gay rights by organisations such as Stonewall. The AIDS groups and charities in Britain instead focused on extending education and awareness rather than a political activist approach. As noted previously, this difference between American and British medical contexts and issues cannot be judged in terms of audience reception, but it is assumed that audiences can actively engage with the piece without in-depth knowledge of these facets. In positioning instead the ideas of love and loss in relation to AIDS as politicised elements, Larson broadens the political scope of his work. Much like the characters he uses opened up the dialogue of AIDS drama to a wider demographic, in focusing on this personal political facet, Larson again widens the voice of his text, particularly useful in addressing political elements outside of its native New York.

The depictions of AIDS activism as seen in plays like The Normal Heart or Angels show the politics of AIDS in a very specific political moment in America. Larson’s work, while having a political stance, is more generalised in its approach; a heavy-handed or specific political approach is also not in keeping with Larson’s overarching and inclusive approach. Although Larson depicts a very specific community, his ethos was that of inclusion, or certainly reaching as wide a demographic as possible. Larson’s message of community as a force for both action and caring is one that can be transposed anywhere. As the enduring and worldwide success of subsequent productions of Rent showed, there was a kind of universal appeal to Larson’s text that transcended the specific community he depicted. In using community action, which can be transposed and viewed in light of communities wherever the text is performed, Larson allows his text to be both community specific to the East Village, and a message that can be understood regardless of location. This has been shown through the approach to depicting AIDS in Rent: though the condition is inescapable it is not made alienating through details, and the theatrical approach is one that is emotionally accessible to any audience.
4.3 Response to Rent

It was considered above how Rent depicted AIDS through performance and how this depiction was transposed to the British stage. It has been shown that the content relating to AIDS was communicated effectively through production choices, and would was successfully transposed to the British stage. To conclude the analysis of the British production of Rent, the press reception will be considered and the overall effect of transposing Rent to the British stage will be examined.

4.3.1 British Press response

Rent ran for fifteen months in London, closing in October 1999. Limited revivals took place at the Prince of Wales Theatre from 4th December 2001 to 6th January 2002, and from 6th December 2002 to 1st March 2003, following a UK tour. There was also a successful production in Manchester in 2006, with an additional 'goodbye' performance in 2008 from the Manchester cast. Though not as impressive as the fifteen year run of the Broadway production, this is still a successful run by West End standards, where often a year is considered a lengthy run.

The success of Rent in New York was well known when the show arrived in London; and many London reviewers commented on the New York production in their reviews, often alongside questioning Rent’s ability to succeed in London. David Gritten commented ‘Rent will clearly not storm London just because of the raves from across the pond’ though in fact, Rent sold well on the basis of its American success and did establish a solid business for its year and half run. The press response indicates a level of scepticism around Rent, but with a musical that pushed boundaries in musical form as well as content, this was to be expected. There was also scepticism of the ability of Rent to translate to the British theatrical landscape. Joanna Coles in The Guardian asked whether it would work in London, suggesting three reasons why it might not. The first two were that London was less collectively traumatised by AIDS, and that there was a cultural difference or distance to the East Village lifestyle portrayed. These two reasons are valid observations; however despite not being as directly affected by AIDS, Britain was affected and aware of the worldwide impact of AIDS. The idea also that in order to connect to a musical, British audiences needed to be directly affected is to take a narrow view. Britain was far less affected by Vietnam, yet Boubil and Schönberg’s

Miss Saigon was a huge success in London. Likewise the success of Angels a few years earlier indicated that despite the differences in experience, British audiences were receptive to American depictions of AIDS. Coles’s third point highlights that it is an unfinished work. This is a fair point: as explored previously, Rent could have taken on a different shape had its creator lived to make alterations. Coles, in her review, highlights some of the concerns and criticisms of the British press that in essence Rent would not translate.

The textual analysis has demonstrated that aspects of Rent, particularly in relation to depictions of AIDS, were communicated effectively to British audiences. Negative reaction was present in reviews, relating to the content itself, albeit more in relation to the style of Larson’s text than the wider themes. Charles Spencer said: ‘I have a horrible suspicion however that the grotesque sentimentality won’t prevent Rent from becoming a huge hit in touchy-feely post Diana Britain.’666 While being slightly patronising to the British theatre-going public, Spencer’s statement that the emotional resonance in Rent was central to its appeal is fairly accurate, and is not a reflection on the transposition of the text to Britain, but rather an issue of personal taste. The idea of a post-Diana Britain is an interesting approach in terms of audience reaction. What Spencer is alluding to is the public outpouring of grief that happened in relation to the death of Diana Princess of Wales in 1997. In breaking with traditional British reserve, the public mourning of Diana’s death marked a transitional moment in public consciousness. What Spencer alludes to here, albeit sarcastically, is a shift in public demonstrability, and perhaps a desire for a more emotional approach to life. In this public mentality, Spencer reasons that what he views as a highly sentimental musical might appeal to the theatre going public. John Peter also has issues with what he views as an overly sentimental approach in Rent. He says that at times it is ‘from your heart sincerity’ but that ‘well-meaning but oppressing political correctness’ made him ‘recoil in despair.’667 Here, Peter makes a point that the emotional approach of Rent may not appeal to all audience members. For some, it will be too heavy-handed or too saccharine. However, such matters of taste apply to any theatrical performance and audience group.

The links between the American and British production are highlighted by the reviews. Alistair McCauley comments that the West End version though ‘virtually identical [to Broadway]…looks rather more feeble and obscure.’668 McCauley’s comments have a slight

667 Ibid.
contradiction at the heart: if *Rent* is ‘virtually identical’ in London then the judgement that it looks feeble and obscure is possibly more influenced by its perceived effect than actual appearance. What McCauly seems to allude to is that the reception of *Rent* was less strong when transposed to Britain, rather than that there were any differences in the quality of the musical production. Prejudice relating to *Rent* on Broadway seems to relate little to the content and therefore depiction of AIDS.

It is reasonable, however, to ask whether McCauly does have a point: is the West End version always destined to be if not ‘feeble’, certainly somehow a lesser copy? This is a question expanded on when considering a revived text in the next chapter. It is perhaps a fair assessment that a re-staged version of a theatrical text, particularly when exported to a new country or on tour, will never quite capture the original. In the case of *Rent*, there is perhaps a particular status that comes with the original cast and production. They are the only actors to work directly with the original composer on the piece. They also had the experience no subsequent cast could have, of working on the production in its original East Village location, a facet which, combined with the fact that they were working directly with Larson, lends a certain authenticity to the performance. Those performers following the original cast will inevitably be a somehow ‘lesser’ copy. In staging the performance elsewhere with another cast, however, the production also gains other elements through both the performers involved and the environment in which it is staged.

The comparison of the productions by the press is of relevance in considering the transposition of the text to Britain. Some, such as John Peter of *The Sunday Times*, took precise issue with the inherent ‘New York’ feel of the show, saying: ‘You can take the show out of New York but you can’t take New York out of the show.’ Peter felt that the musical was so embedded in its location that the transposition to London did not work. Again, this is problematic given many examples of New York (or American) based musicals that have been successful in Britain. From Sondheim’s *Company* to *Hair* (with which *Rent* was frequently compared) to *Guys and Dolls*, which was revived at the National in 1996, resolutely ‘New York’ musicals had found success in Britain. David Benedict of *The Independent* also noted the ‘hundred and one local factors’ in *Rent* that he believed both explained its success but also caused him to question whether it would travel well. These comments highlight the potential issues of staging the production in London: there was an element of an artistic

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judgement on the production, as well as perhaps a reference to the AIDS content not functioning as well in Britain.

There was, however, within the press little mention of the part AIDS played in Larson’s text. For some, like the American reviewers previously, AIDS became a label by which to categorise the musical. One such was deJongh, who said:

This famous, mid-Nineties American musical that makes a song and dance affair of AIDS and drug addiction with young lovers, straight, gay and lesbian, not to mention a frisson of transvestitism.\(^{671}\)

In this example, AIDS is one of a list of factors that categorise the musical for the reviewer; but for many, AIDS no longer seemed a central focus of their analysis - a contrast to responses to Angels a few years earlier. This may be due in part to the historical moment when it was performed in Britain. Performed at a point when the urgency of the early days of the epidemic were over, and at a point where treatments were improving in Britain particularly, there did not seem to be as strong an urgency by 1998 around surrounding AIDS. Rent as a theatrical text, therefore, had a different function in Britain when it was staged.

David Thomas in his review for The Times asks:

New York went crazy for the tale of doomed love, Aids and drug addiction that is Rent. But will the hit Broadway musical have cynical British theatregoers queuing round the block for a ticket?\(^{672}\)

Thomas indicates here that the content, specifically including AIDS, may be something of an alienating factor to British audiences. He also indicates that the manner in which Larson approaches the subject may be equally problematic for, as he terms them, ‘cynical’ British audiences. What Thomas seems to indicate is that the sentimentality associated with perhaps musicals and American theatre is contrasting with what he views as British audience sensibilities. Thomas’s view is open to debate, and universalising statements about audience behaviour are dangerous; however in relation to other texts on AIDS as well as theatrical trends outlined elsewhere, this may be accurate. Thomas’s assessment of British audience trends is also based on personal experience as a theatre critic, and therefore may be an opinion (in relation to Rent, AIDS and audiences) that can be considered to hold weight.


Thomas goes on to examine what he and other reviewers in Britain saw as a key error in *Rent’s* depiction of AIDS: its approach to the condition and whether it was both realistic and political enough. In his review, Thomas comments, ‘Ironically, though, the problem with *Rent* is not that it is radical, but that it is not radical enough.’\footnote{Ibid.} He goes on to make a comparison with *Trainspotting*, which he sees as Britain’s response to the same era. Thomas, in making this comparison, is highlighting how British culture when faced with troublesome issues (such as ‘a generation racked by drugs and disease’\footnote{Thomas, David. 28\textsuperscript{th} March, 1998} came up with the grittier realism of *Trainspotting*. In comparison, Thomas says that: ‘Given the same situation, Broadway proved that there is no circumstance so vile that America cannot sanitise it, glamorise it and successfully commercialise.’\footnote{Ibid.} Thomas’s review sees the use of *Rent* as reductive, and seems to want more realism, less sentimentality. This may be a fair comment, but Larson’s central aim was to depict a story of hope in relation to AIDS. Thomas is also drawing national lines in his criticism, attributing what he sees as shortcomings to the American origins of the piece. However, Thomas’s points are backed up by British theatrical traditions. The work of Edward Bond in addressing the darker elements of society and human behaviour, and comparable work by Mark Ravenhill which addresses issues of sexuality (including that of AIDS in modern cities) offer a far darker outlook.\footnote{Ravenhill’s play *Some Explicit Polaroid*’s (1999) deals specifically with AIDS, and was produced the year after *Rent* in London. Other work by Ravenhill including *Shopping and Fucking* (1996), which dealt with issues of sexuality in 1990s London (prior to *Rent’s* staging). Later works by Ravenhill continued to explore these themes, such as *Mother Clapp’s Molly House* (2000) and his musical work *Ten Plagues* (2011), which did not address AIDS specifically but deals with the issues of contagion and plague.}

Other reviewers who mention Larson’s approach to representing AIDS further deride it. John Peter of *The Times* is puzzled at the approach *Rent* takes to AIDS, taking into consideration that it is a later text on the subject, saying: ‘This is exactly the kind of soppy exhibitionism that has done the cause of Aids sufferers so much harm; and it is strange that a show that first opened as late as 1996 could still indulge in it.’\footnote{Peter, John, *Rent Review*, The Times, London, 17\textsuperscript{th} May 1998.} Peter’s assessment is that given the years that it was written in, *Rent* should be more progressive, and probably more political than it is in order to be considered a meaningful statement on AIDS. Nevertheless, while *Rent* can be considered a sentimental piece, I disagree that the musical does people with AIDS harm. The significance that *Rent* has in depicting AIDS is a good thing for those with the condition, particularly those in Britain. The emotional attachment and the
development of those groups depicted helped bring greater awareness of AIDS. Peter goes on to call it ‘Hair, with added Aids.’ In this context, comparing Rent to Hair is not a reference or compliment to Larson’s piece continuing the legacy of the 1960s rock musical, but is rather a disparaging comment on the political content. Peter sees Rent as existing in a commune separate to the reality of the world it claims to represent, concluding that it is problematic as a text on AIDS. He suggests that watching Rent for British audiences in 1998 may be like watching the revival of Hair several years later in 2010: a nostalgic fiction idealised but with little reflection of reality or real political message. Though British audiences were viewing Rent as a slightly historical piece, this was not detrimental to its impact. Rent did not, as illustrated, need to be realistic or have a direct political message to be an effective depiction of AIDS through performance. It is fair that the sentimental element was not to everyone’s taste, as reflected in critics like Peter.

The British press response was, therefore, mixed at best, but some critics embraced Rent. Positive reaction is summarised best by Michael Billington who said, ‘Once you strip away the hype and hysteria you find a genuinely enjoyable anthem to modern youth: a touch sentimental and self-admiring but full of melodic invention.’ Billington here highlights one of the problems for critics and audiences seeing Rent in Britain: the initial hype that surrounded it and the subsequent negative press which somewhat blurred views of it. In his comments, Billington is reflecting on the musical as a piece of theatre, rather than the ‘phenomena’ that it had come to be known as in New York. Billington’s response reflects a more measured and perhaps fairer approach to Larson’s text. Although he is not heralding Rent as the saviour of musical theatre as some of his American colleagues did, Billington is recognising Rent as a quality musical with an appeal to audiences.

One particularly strong critique of Rent in the British press was found in an editorial from Joanna Coles of The Guardian. Mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, Coles draws on Sarah Schulman’s book about Larson’s alleged plagiarism of her work. Coles’s article draws on the problems and criticism of Larson’s work. Coles uses Shulman’s complaints to discuss what she deems ‘the most compelling criticism of Larson’s work’ which is, she says, ‘that if, as he insisted, he was genuinely trying to portray life in the East

678 Ibid.
Village, what actually appears on the Broadway stage is arguably something of a travesty. These comments see Rent as an appropriation of a culture, and relates the idea that Larson’s work is detracting from the real, lived experience of those he depicts.

Coles quotes residents of the East Village and some people with AIDS to support her argument. Those she talks to describe their unhappiness with Larson’s portrayal. One comments it has been ‘Disneyfied,’ then goes as far to say ‘I feel like I’ve been raped.’ The issue with Larson’s portrayal of AIDS is both that it is sanitised and that it favours the straight characters, such as Mark, as integral to fighting AIDS. Schulman also said it is ‘like a Benetton Ad.’ This comment by Schulman may be viewed as a double-edged comment, highlighting both the trendy, sanitised element of Rent which is reminiscent of Benetton’s campaigns in the 1990s, and also referencing the controversy over the 1991 Benetton advertisement that used an image of an AIDS sufferer in hospital. Both aspects indicate a ‘commodification’ of AIDS for other purposes. The idea that Rent took the real lives and experiences of people with AIDS and used them for commercial gain was of course problematic for Schulman and Coles. However Larson’s work is not, in my reading, exploitative. The way in which Rent drew on the experiences and lives of those affected by AIDS was no different to Angels or The Normal Heart or any other performance piece. Tony Kushner himself does not have AIDS, but was affected by losing those who did, and so was Larson.

The reactions cited in Coles’s article are extreme, and there is no indication that other critics saw Larson’s work as exploitive. Those cited in Coles are those with particular grievances against Larson’s work; one comment is perhaps pertinent to a British audience: ‘I think the history of Aids should be taught in schools. More people know and think they understand about Aids through Rent than will ever know about it truthfully.’ In the British setting, with Rent coming later in the epidemic and appealing to a younger demographic, the danger of the minimal information about AIDS contained in Rent being the only information relayed to an audience is worrying. Rent was not, like many second generation AIDS plays, designed as an information service to audience, unlike its predecessors. Once again, realism or educational content are not the only markers of a successful piece. Rent did not strive for gritty realism, or detailed medical or political information. What Rent did deliver was an

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682 Ibid.
683 Ibid.
emotive, character-driven work on AIDS. In this, *Rent* succeeds, and the effect of the emotional connection with an audience also serves as an effective depiction of AIDS in performance.

These criticisms of *Rent* as an educational work on AIDS and its perceived shortcomings were accompanied by other articles whose criticisms were based more on artistic merit than content. David Gritten failed to be won over by *Rent*, saying; 'It has been hailed as the saviour of the musical but despite the nobility of its conscience too much of the show is laudable for its attempt rather than its realisation.'

Such criticism is justified and perhaps expected for a musical that certainly strayed from the expected norms of the genre, if not broke the mould entirely. As with any artistic or theatrical endeavour, there were bound to be critics who disliked the composer’s and director’s approaches. The facet of updating *Boheme*, as McCauley highlights, also garnered negative attention from opera purists. The overall criticism on an artistic level, however, did not completely negate *Rent*'s artistic merit.

Though there was negativity both towards the content and form of *Rent*, critics did recognise that there was an appeal to the show. There was praise from some reviewers for Larson’s musical ability, as well as the work as a whole. Nick deJongh’s comments, ‘Her proposition Light my Candle captures a mood of sexy, wistful yearning more powerfully than any West End Musical song this decade.’ This is a powerful compliment, indicating that Larson’s piece displayed reflected a high level of musical talent. In highlighting the musical ability of the composer, deJongh draws attention to the importance of *Rent* as a work of musical theatre. Much attention was paid by other critics to the hype surrounding *Rent*, as well as its content in relation to British audiences; but deJongh’s review indicates its importance in musical theatre. This is also seen in Billington’s assessment, who praises Larson with the remark, ‘He also writes powerful and romantic songs including a deeply Sonheimite [sic] one Without You in which love is designed by a series of negatives.’ In comparing Larson’s song to Sondheim, the leading American composer of previous decades, Billington is giving high praise to Larson’s work. There were certainly elements to praise in *Rent*, and as producer Jeffery Seller noted, the show was not selling out on Broadway for three years on hype alone; there were people coming because of the strength of the show. Tempering the criticism of Larson’s style elsewhere, Billington offers the comment that hit

686 Billington, 14th May 1998.
rock musicals are rare.\textsuperscript{688} By saying this, he is indicating that the critical issues that Larson’s musical encountered may be related in part to the form as much as to Larson’s own content and style.

4.3.2 Rent: AIDS and theatre in Britain

The press evaluation of Rent in Britain as shown above did not echo the rave reviews of New York. There was trepidation due to the hype surrounding the New York production and the success of Rent in America. British reviewers were also cautious about whether the musical would translate well to British audiences. Despite some negative reception by critics, however, the production still connected with fans in Britain. The love for the show and the strength of support from those who loved it played a strong part in Rent’s success in both New York and London. As Anthony Rapp comments, ‘People have said to me afterwards that it has changed their life. If people are going through difficult times the show can be a source of great comfort and incredibly cathartic for them.’\textsuperscript{689} Rapp here indicates a far more important element in relation to Rent’s effect the connection with fans. Although critical opinion is important for box office sales and therefore for the success of a piece, it is not the only factor. Critics reflect an element of audience response but do not represent the entire audience. Fans of Rent, just as in America, were affected strongly by the show and were very loyal to it. As will be explored in relation to the revival, this fan dedication to Rent is intrinsic to its long ranging effects, both as a depiction of AIDS and on the wider theatrical landscape.

\textsuperscript{689} Rapp, Anthony in Fanshawe, Simon, \textit{The American musical comes of age} The Independent Sunday, 19th April 1998.
Chapter 5 ‘Nothing’s lost forever’ Reviving Texts on AIDS in London

5.1 Introduction

In 2007 both Angels and Rent were revived in London within months of each other.\textsuperscript{690} As with the original productions, these revivals were different in their approach, and potentially their target audience. Rent once again was staged in the West End, at the Duke of York’s theatre, while Angels was staged at the off-West End subsidised theatre, The Lyric Hammersmith. The staging so closely of these texts is, as noted in the introduction, more happenstance than design. The staging in 2007 reflects a suitable distance from the original productions that renewed interest may be assumed by producers. Revivals that occur closer to the original run the risk of a lack of interest due to their proximity to the original.

The successful revival of a play or musical promises both artistic and financial rewards. To revive a play is to re-stage one that was already performed, usually with a new cast, director and design team. The revival in theatre is another stage in this re-telling process. A revival can be used commemoratively as a reminder of a theatrical or historical past or can be used to illustrate a point about the present. A revival can also simply be an opportunity to revisit a well-loved piece of entertainment. In all cases the original conditions of production, both in terms of the theatrical landscape and the socio-cultural backdrop, as well as the present day circumstances have a bearing on the production and its reception. The former elements are particularly pertinent in reviving texts on AIDS. The use of previous works dealing with AIDS may be used in the present day to inform and educate audiences about the history of the pandemic, and draw back attention to it. With the shift in diagnosis, treatment and cultural reaction to AIDS between the first staging and the revivals,\textsuperscript{691} it will be considered how Angels and Rent as performed in London in 2007 communicate with a British audience in relation to AIDS.

\textsuperscript{690} Angels in America was revived at the Lyric Hammersmith from 28\textsuperscript{th} June- 22 July and Rent: Remixed was staged at the Duke of York’s Theatre from October 16\textsuperscript{th} to February 2\textsuperscript{nd} 2008.

\textsuperscript{691} See Appendix 1 for a full timeline of AIDS history and development.
5.1.2 Revival

The nature of the revival in theatre is a broad one, as it encompasses a spectrum of theatrical performance. Revivals in general, as with theatre and performance more broadly, are subject to trends and often come in waves with plays or musicals of a similar era or style being revived together. The motivation behind revival can be seen as an offshoot of adaptation theory. As Linda Hutcheon explores in her work, ‘We retell - and show again and interact anew with stories over and over; in the process, they change with each repetition, and yet they are recognizably the same’\footnote{Hutcheon, Linda, *A Theory of Adaptation*, Routledge, London, 1988, p177.}. This can apply to revivals, which recreate a performance that is recognisably the same as the original but which changes at each re-staging.

To chart the history of the revival in either British theatre or in musical theatre respectively is beyond the scope of this analysis. There was resurgence in revival on Broadway around 2007, as outlined in Stempel’s analysis.\footnote{Stempel, Larry, *Showtime a History of the Broadway Musical Theater*, W Norton & Company Incorporated, 2010.} Stempel sees the revival trend on Broadway as a parallel to the ‘British invasion’\footnote{Commonly used to refer to the period in which many of the UK ‘mega musicals’ were imported to Broadway in the late 1980s and early 1990s, a reference back to the 1960s popular music period heralded by the Beatles.} saying that ‘Today’s Broadway has become so haunted by yesterday’s that historicism itself seems to play a role in determining the current repertoire of Broadway offerings.’\footnote{Ibid.} This is supported, in Stempel’s view, by the fact that the American Theatre Wing added a category for ‘best revival’ in 1994.\footnote{Ibid.} The description of this category offers an important definition that may be transferred to London theatre in terms of defining a revival.\footnote{As no equivalent definition exists for the London Society of Theatre, the London equivalent of the American Theatre Wing, both bodies that along with Equity govern theatre in their respective countries/cities.}

A “Revival” Shall be any production in an eligible Broadway theatre of a play or musical that…is deemed a “Classic” or in the historical or popular repertoire …[or that] was previously presented professionally.\footnote{American Theatre Wing, quoted in Stempel, L. 2010, p 646.}

This definition can be transposed to the British theatrical landscape. The definitions of ‘classic’, ‘historical’ and ‘popular’ translate easily, although on both continents are obviously open to interpretation. The stipulation ‘previously presented professionally’ also may be
easily applied in British theatre to mean that it has been performed already by any paid artists in a commercial environment.\footnote{Commercial in this sense is in the literal sense of a service charged for with a view to making money. Though some West End Productions are for publically subsidised companies they are all designed to make money therefore the commercial label is appropriate.}

The revival is potentially a problematic theatrical endeavour. It runs the risk of being considered inferior to the original production. In staging a revival, there is also the risk that an audience’s appetite for seeing the same show again has been overestimated; and the potential for revivals to fail commercially is very real. However, without the revival, theatre would arguably be a quieter and certainly less financially stable environment. There is a kind of ‘safety net’ associated with revival; in that the material is known as a proven commodity. This draws on Carlson’s argument for the ‘advantages for a dramatist taking already known narratives for his raw material’\footnote{Carlson, Marvin\textit{ The Haunted Stage: The Theatre as a Memory Machine}, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003.}. Carlson here is talking about using known stories to create new drama, but this can also apply to revivals. In taking existing or known theatrical stories and re-staging them in revival, that production also re-appropriates a familiar performance story for a new audience. Producers and theatre companies rely on revivals of proven commodities to bring financial rewards.

Revivals of musicals are more common than new musicals, due to the level of expense involved in mounting new productions. Steven Alder, in his work on corporate influence on Broadway, notes that a revival of a musical is now more likely than a new musical. The ‘proven commodity’ element of the musical is more secure a bet than a new expensive and risky musical.\footnote{Adler, Steven.\textit{ On Broadway: Art and Commerce on the Great White Way}. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2004. Chapter 3,\textit{ Broadway, Inc.} p68.} Alder also mentions that there are more straight plays re-staged for the same reasons, the risk involved in financing them.\footnote{Ibid.} As with musicals, revivals of “classic” plays are reliant on the perception of audience appetite for revisiting these plays; and there appears a continual appetite for this in the West End. As J. Hillis Miller states, ‘We need the ‘same’ stories over and over, then as one of the most powerful, perhaps the most powerful, of ways to assert the basic ideology of our culture.’\footnote{Miller, J. Hillis ‘Narrative’ in Lentricchia Frank and McLaughlin, Thomas Eds,\textit{ Critical Terms for Literary Study}, 2\textsuperscript{nd} Edition, University of Chicago Press, Illinois, 1995.} In re-telling, these dramatic stories - like any other stories - re-assert basic cultural ideologies and in that re-asserting. In this case the ideology in these narratives on AIDS becomes a part of a wider cultural ideology.
There has been little direct academic analysis of the revival in theatre. Marvin Carlson touches on elements of revival in *Theatre Audiences and the Reading of Performance*, drawing on the changing interpretations of audiences in different historical periods. Carlson’s analysis here is not specifically concerned with revival or the historical context of a performance but with the wider reader or audience relationship with performance. Although useful in considering audience in relation to revivals, Carlson’s does not present a detailed analysis of revival. Some general analysis is found in Roger Bechtel’s *Past Performance: American Theatre and the Historical Imagination*, in which Bechtel posits a reflection about American theatre creating a new means of reflecting on the past. In *Theatre/Archaeology*, Pearson and Shanks explore ideas around the archaeological relationship of theatre to society; and they, like Bechtel, relate at times to the idea of reviving texts. In addition, the analysis of adaptation such as Linda Hutcheon’s work has application in considering revival, particularly her work on what constitutes adaptation and audiences for adaptation. Bennett’s *Performing Nostalgia: Shifting Shakespeare and the Contemporary Past* offers analysis of specifically Shakespeare revival, some of which can be transposed onto other revivals.

There are also a few texts on Musical theatre that have touched on the notion of revival, as will be explored in relation to *Rent*; these include Steven Alder’s book, cited above. In *On Broadway: Art and Commerce on the Great White Way*, Alder discusses the notion of the revival in relation to the corporate business side of Broadway. In this he discusses revivals as having a ‘safety net’ in regards to prospective audiences. Alder’s book, though useful in this respect, takes a practical, producer’s approach to the notion of the musical in relation to commercial output rather than offering an artistic analysis. Similarly, there are parts in *The Broadway Musical: Collaboration in Commerce and Art* dedicated to revival which also focus on the commercial potential of a musical revival.

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705 Carlson, in Postlewait and McConachie, p83.


In relation to the revival in musicals, American critic Ben Brantley provides some interesting critique in his review of the 2006 Les Miserables revival. Comparatively little has been written academically on the theatrical revivals. However, Ben Brantley, an eminent American theatre critic, articulates clearly some of the issues with the revival machine in theatre in this review. The title is Didn’t we Just see this Revolution?\textsuperscript{712} and he likens the reviving of Les Miserables here to a father tiredly repeating the same bedtime story night after night. In this instance, because Les Miserables ran for so long on Broadway (1987-2003) and had been closed for a comparatively short period of three years, Brantley felt the revival was at best a poor copy of the original. He describes it as “functioning in a mild state of sedation”\textsuperscript{713}.

Although clearly unimpressed by this particular revival, Brantley goes on to raise interesting points about the nature of revival itself. He says that:

> The new “Les Miserables” belongs to a trend that might be described as revival by Xerox. In many ways it is a facsimile of its prototype. But its colors look less sharp and the humanizing textures of the original are almost entirely absent.\textsuperscript{714}

Brantley here is suggesting that restaging is an attempt to create carbon copies of earlier productions on stage. What this does not show, however, is that perhaps they also provide what audiences are looking for - a copy of a much loved original or a production they missed. Brantley’s review echoes Derrida’s work on texts being ‘haunted’ by other texts. In Spectres of Marx\textsuperscript{715}, Derrida explores how the identity of things is marked by our interactions with that thing. And as Carlson argues, drama has relied on retelling of stories already known to its public. Carlson concludes that this means:

> [A] narrative that is haunted in almost every aspect - its names, its character relationships, the structure of its action, even small physical or linguistic details - by a specific previous narrative.\textsuperscript{716}

Carlson here refers to all theatrical production; however this is particularly true of revivals. Fitting with Brantley’s reflections on revivals, audiences are always working with texts haunted by not only past productions but other expectations of the stories being told. These

\textsuperscript{712} Brantley, Ben Didn’t we Just see this Revolution? The New York Times, 10\textsuperscript{th} November 2006.
\textsuperscript{713} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{714} Ibid.
expectations draw on a variety of cultural influences, and are taken into any production. However when that production is a revival, these expectations are multiplied.

What Brantley highlights in the quotation above, however, is that these revivals in trying to recreate exactly what the original was will inevitably fall short. In the examples Brantley is talking about, revivals were trying to replicate the original production; the examples of Rent and Angels considered here differ in that they were both revivals that sought to stage, in some respects, a different version of the text to the original. They perhaps are thus able to avoid some of the ‘Xerox’ pitfalls that Brantley describes; however, there is still in any revival of a text the danger that the new version will be considered an inferior copy of the original. This consideration will be incorporated into the evaluation of the depiction of AIDS in these revivals, alongside the wider artistic significance or merit of these revivals.

5.2 Reviving Angels in America

Angels was staged in 2007, this time in the commercial venue of the Lyric Hammersmith. The revival of Angels by Headlong Theatre Company and directed by Daniel Kramer marked the first full revival in Britain. It toured venues around Britain before finishing with a run at London’s Lyric Hammersmith between 20th June and 22nd July 2007. The decision to revive the full text, as well as to return it to London, marks this production as significant to the theatrical landscape. Angels had never had a West End run, due to its being a risky production to mount. The risks involved with putting on Angels relate to its size and scope, creating potentially prohibitive costs and technical demands of a theatre company. The length and subject matter also make Angels an unsafe investment. In New York, although the initial run was at a Broadway theatre - the equivalent of running first in the West End - the revival, though hugely successful and profitable, took place in a similar venue to the Lyric Hammersmith.

717 The Lyric began life in 1895 as an opera house; it functioned as a theatre until 1966 when it was forced to close. The theatre was dismantled piece by piece and rebuilt in its current location re-opening in 1979. The external parts of the building underwent another major refurbishment in 2004 but the theatre space remains essentially unchanged.
718 The tour included stops at The Citizens Theatre Glasgow and the Lowry Salford before the run at the Lyric Hammersmith in London. <www.headlong.co.uk/productions>
719 Angels being two full length plays rather than one already puts a demand on scheduling for a theatre company. It requires a comparatively large cast of eight actors and the technical demands of flying the Angel and other effects are cost-prohibitive to many theatre companies. In addition the potentially controversial subject matter makes the plays for many a risky investment.
The Lyric details its aims as the following: ‘The Lyric Hammersmith aims to produce work that is provoking, entertaining, popular, eclectic, messy, contradictory and diverse. We want to be at the heart of our community as well as being internationally recognised. We want to celebrate the unique vision of the writer as well as the creative power of collaboration. We want to work with the best theatre artists around as well as encourage the next generation. We want to lurch wildly between high art and populism - hopefully achieving both at the same time.’ This indicates that the Lyric, much like the Cottesloe space at the National, was a theatre driven by innovation and nurturing theatrical development.

Director Daniel Kramer comments that the purpose of reviving *Angels* was ‘Change and AIDS’. This serves the idea of a revival well, as Kushner said of work on AIDS; ‘The point is not to say things that an audience want to hear, but to make sure we make more noise so that they hear what we have to say.’ This was as pertinent in the theatrical climate of 2007 as it was in 1993/4. *Angels*, the theatrical text, still enables an address to such issues; and Kushner’s work focuses on the idea of a community, a collective response to AIDS through the network of characters he depicts. Kramer felt particularly strongly about this element in reviving *Angels*, asking: ‘where has that community gone? Why aren’t we taking responsibility for each other and our health as a gay community?’ The director here gives strong reasons for reviving the text, this reasoning resonating strongly with the facets of popular culture relating to depictions of both homosexuality and AIDS.

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720 Lyric Hammersmith, www.Lyric.co.uk
5.2.1 Context

*Angels* was staged in the main theatre, a proscenium arch space with 550 seats. This choice of venue indicates a confidence that *Angels* was commercially viable. *Angels* was commissioned by artistic director David Farr. The artistic remit of the Lyric is very similar to that of the National Theatre, where *Angels* was first produced in Britain. Although the Lyric is not subsidised in the way the National is it is nonetheless supported by the Arts Council and local London councils, therefore not as overtly a commercial venue as a West End theatre or a Broadway theatre. Detailed on their website. Another of their aims states: ‘The Lyric is about opportunity, collaboration and the exploration of everything new.’ Alongside the commitment to the new, however, the Lyric also states: ‘Revival is very much at the heart of the Lyric.’ It is important that *Angels* was revived in a theatre whose policy included a focus on revivals. As a large undertaking in terms of staging and a significant one in terms of the play’s initial significance, reviving *Angels* required a team consistent with this.

*Angels* was revived with Headlong Theatre Company, who make: “[E]xhilarating, risk-taking and provocative new work to take around the country and the world.” The company, within this artistic remit, produce a wide variety of works ranging from the traditional - such as the 2003 production of Chekov’s *The Cherry Orchard* - to reworking of existing works such as 2006’s production of Milton’s *Paradise Lost*. The history of Headlong as a company producing innovative and challenging work is appropriate for a group reviving *Angels*.

It is significant also that in 2006 *Angels* was toured outside of London, visiting Glasgow, Newcastle, Cambridge and Salford. This tour marks the first time the play could be seen in its entirety outside of London. That the production was seen outside London would have bearing on and influence the production, but also illustrates a shift in provincial theatre artistic policies that would previously not have considered a production as theatrically and thematically ambitious as *Angels*. While the wider theatrical landscape of Britain is not

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724 Lyric Hammersmith, <www.Lyric.co.uk>
725 Ibid.
726 Full artistic manifesto found at. <www.Lyric.co.uk/aboutus>
727 Founded in 1974 working out of the Oxford playhouse the company moved to London in 2002 but retained the original name until 2006. Angels in America therefore being the inaugural production under the new name.
729 Directed by Dominic Dromogole
730 Adapted by Ben Power and Rupert Gould and directed by Rupert Gould
731 Tour dates and locations for these productions were: 20th April-12 May 2007, Citizens Theatre Glasgow, 16th May-25th May, Northern Stage, Newcastle, 29th May-2nd June Cambridge Arts Theatre, 4th-9th June The Lowry, Salford, 20th June-29th July Lyric Hammersmith.
the focus of this study (for the purposes of focus) that Angels was not being seen beyond the artistic focal point of London indicates both its prominence as an artistic work, and its ability to transpose to a British theatrical setting.

The theatre in which Angels was revived, and the company responsible for the revival, are influential in the reception of the text. Lefebvre links space to social forces, and the change from Angels at the National to a more commercial London Theatre venue may be linked to what Lefebvre calls ‘monuments of Capitalism’\textsuperscript{732}. While the Lyric is not somewhere which would usually be known as a ‘monumental theatre’, Lefebvre’s analysis bears consideration. The theatre is not ‘monumental’ in Carlson’s reading either; however, his idea of theatre spaces being associated with its particular district is still relevant. Indeed, this can also be aligned with McAuley’s analysis in which she agrees that theatre locations do not totally determine the audience in attendance at a particular production but: ‘the location nevertheless makes some kind of statement about who is expected or encouraged to participate and who might feel discouraged from attempting to do so.’\textsuperscript{733} McAuley here indicates that the theatre, influenced by its location, comes with cultural expectations for the audience. This is pertinent for the theatre in which Angels was revived, the Lyric Hammersmith being far from the cultural centre of London theatre. Therefore the viewers of Angels chose to watch the performance either for reasons based on foreknowledge of the theatre or of Headlong as a company, or were seeking out the play itself.

The fact that Angels was not staged in what Bennett describes as ‘a district where culture is privileged and an important part of the established social activity’\textsuperscript{734}, as it had been in its original staging, raises questions about likely audiences and the positioning of Angels in the theatrical landscape in 2007. For Knowles also ‘the geographical location of the space in the city of elsewhere is therefore significant for the understanding of theatrical production and reception alike.’ This was considered in relation to Angels at the National and can and should be considered in relation to its revival. In staging the text at the Lyric then, the geographical location for performance is significantly altered, potentially altering audience and reception. Moving away from the National removes some of the ‘monumental’ facets and influence that Carlson considers, however it also removes Angels from what are deemed to be the cultural and theatrical centres of London. The removal from the National similarly takes

\textsuperscript{734} Bennett, Susan, 1997, p125.
the text away from what McAuley refers to as ‘edifice’ theatres, and the association these hold with certain kinds of traditional performance. In staging Angels at the Lyric, the theatre and its audience are altered from that of the National audiences who watched Angels originally.

The wider theatrical landscape in which the text is revived is also significant in considering the text in revival. In the 2007 season, three productions are of particular note in relation to Angels. Firstly, Tony Kushner’s Caroline or Change - his first musical - was staged in the Lyttelton theatre. A major production for the National Theatre, it began in October 2006 following a 2004 Broadway production. This was significant in continuing playwright Kushner’s relationship with the National Theatre and also for the perceived continued appetite for his work in Britain. In this period the National also staged a production of Brecht’s Caucasian Chalk Circle and Tennessee Williams’ The Rose Tattoo - significant in that Kushner has spoken of the influence of both on his writing. The latter was also important in that its performance showed a continued artistic interest in the American theatrical canon was being maintained in Britain by the National.

In the broader theatrical landscape in this year, Angels in America may be considered to be in keeping with a wider trend. There were a significant body of American plays critically acclaimed across the 2007 season; the West End saw a major revival of Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf, while in musical theatre Porgy and Bess and Sunday in the Park with George were revived, and new American musical Avenue Q came to the West End. In British theatre, the West End showed comedies Donkey’s Years and The 39 Steps, which were both commercial hits for British playwrights. In off-West End productions, theatres away from the commercial West End staged a variety of works that showed diversity in British theatre. The Old Vic staged Moon for the Misbegotten, and the Donmar Warehouse produced Frost/Nixon, detailing the infamous interview with the former

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735 McAuley, 1999, p38.
737 Williams, Tennessee, The Rose Tattoo, directed by Nicholas Hytner, Olivier Theatre, 30th March 2007.
These plays illustrate both interest in America’s theatrical past with the revivals of classic texts, as well as an on-going interest in the politics and culture of America. The American revivals and new productions sat alongside a strong contingent of British new works and revivals. Alan Bennett staged his new work Rock N’Roll\textsuperscript{745}, first at the Royal Court and then in the West End, showing the West End was willing and able to support new works. Other new and challenging works in the West End were available, led by Scottish playwright David Harrower with his hard hitting play Blackbird\textsuperscript{746}. The West End at this time, therefore, was a balance of imported works, new and old British theatre, and traditional and newer works. This landscape indicates that British theatre audiences were responding to a variety of works and that a challenging revival such as Angels would not be problematic.

5.2.2 The Production

I saw this production in full four times, making detailed notes regarding performance, design and staging.\textsuperscript{747} The experience of seeing the play live, multiple times\textsuperscript{748} allows for a fuller understanding of the text in performance. In experiencing the performance live I was able to gain first-hand experience of the performed text, and experience this particular director’s interpretation of Kushner’s play. Having gone into the first experience of the play with substantial fore-knowledge of the piece, my viewing was obviously coloured by knowledge and expectations of the text but through multiple viewings allowed me to cultivate a strong knowledge and understanding of this particular production. My own notes and memories are supported here by archival research and the press reviews quoted. In terms of design and staging, the press and archival images support my own notes made at the time of performance. Having seen recordings of other productions, as well as archival material, I am in a position to compare, to some degree, these productions.

Presented in a different environment physically to the original Cottesloe production, this version of Kushner’s play was created to fit into traditional proscenium arch theatres. These were of varying sizes but all were larger than the original, with its only 300 strong


\textsuperscript{746} Harrower, David, Blackbird, 2005, Directed by Peter Stein, Albery Theatre. The play, inspired in part by sex offender Toby Studebaker, revolves around a young woman meeting up with a man with whom she had a sexual relationship when she was twelve.

\textsuperscript{747} As I also wrote about Angels for my Masters dissertation which was completed in September 2007, I made detailed notes following each performance I viewed.

\textsuperscript{748} I saw the complete version of parts 1&2 four times, and Millennium an additional time.
audience. This set up immediately changes the dynamics of the play from the previous design direction, and thus its subsequent communication with an audience. In the Cottesloe, as highlighted in the previous analysis, the actors found themselves close to, and sometimes moving past, the audience, making for a much more intimate experience. The way a set is designed, the way actors are directed and, particularly for a production such as Angels, the way certain special effects are created are all altered significantly when the type of theatre is altered.

In revivals, this is an important element, that audiences may be comparing one or more previous experiences of the play. Seen in the critical response, in which many compared Kramer’s production to either the National’s or Broadway, the ghosts of these performances follow a revival. This can work in favour of those revivals which can improve on a previous production, or update it for a new time. It can of course also backfire, allowing critics to re-hash their dislike of the play, or a revival can be viewed as ‘butchering’ a much loved production. For a matter of personal taste, Kramer’s production staged Angels well. I believe the directing and design choices as well as the alterations to the text worked in the play’s favour. Kramer sought to produce his own version of Angels, honouring Kushner’s text while giving it his own identity.

Kramer’s production of Angels is described by one reviewer as ‘dazzling and beautifully designed’ making it ‘a genuinely thrilling theatrical experience’749. Stylistically the piece is similar in tone and effect to the Cottesloe production, albeit with props and set having a slightly more stylish contemporary feel than the original, which was clearly rooted in the 1980s. This production had a more subtle hint towards the period in which it was set, perhaps grown out of Kramer’s desire to communicate Kushner’s ideas to contemporary audiences. Kramer’s Angel also veers toward the overtly theatrical, being costumed ornately and performing in an exaggerated manner. The original production had used traditional Angel appearance - a white gown and trumpet on a blonde haired actress, reflecting the popular conceptions of Angels’ looks. In Kramer’s version, the Angel was played by Golda Rosheuvel, a mixed race actress. Her costume also did not reflect traditional Angel images: her wings were shimmering black feathers and her dresses made of metallic and blacks which, when used with lighting effects, gave another worldly look to the Angel that was markedly different from that of the original production. In terms of aesthetics, the theatre it is produced in, casting and overall direction, Kramer’s version of Angels maintains a careful

line between altering it enough for a personal approach and maintaining the integrity of the original production and the text.

5.2.3 Depiction of AIDS

As explored in the previous chapters, there is a challenge in presenting AIDS on stage. It is elusive, existing only through its effects and through the ways in which it is represented, a difficult concept for theatrical performance. The physical depiction of AIDS begins with the act of looking at a person with AIDS. This is emphasised in Kramer’s production by keeping Greg Hicks (Roy) and Mark Emerson (Prior) on stage as much as possible. In a technique used across the production, the actors remain on stage after their scenes are completed, their physical presence creating a constant presence of AIDS on stage and in the minds of the audience. An example of this is found early in Millennium,750 in a split scene with, on the one hand, Prior in the hospital being examined by the Nurse Emily, and on the other, Belize and Louis in conversation. As seen, in Kushner’s text and the original Cottesloe production, all four characters share the stage at once. Louis is informed of Prior’s progress while the audience is looking at Prior, manipulating the audience gaze and working in a similar way to the physical depiction of AIDS in placing that gaze on the person with AIDS. This effect can be seen in Kramer’s wider depiction of AIDS across the text.

In using the markers of AIDS on the body, as in the original production, and the actions of the actors performing illness, Kramer’s direction across the production highlights fluidity and interconnectedness within the scenes. Under his direction there was a fluid motion to the scene changes while retaining the ‘actor driven event’ that Kushner instructed. Kramer’s production however, overlapped and interlinked scenes. In split scenes the pace of his direction created closer links between scenes and characters. In having characters overlap on stage across the production the idea of their interconnected lives was emphasised.

Kramer’s fluid production placed a greater emphasis in terms of the impact of AIDS through the interconnectedness and physical presence of those affected. In several scenes Kramer kept both Roy and Prior on stage in the background of the following scene, often remaining on stage until their next scene. This staging device accentuates Kushner’s writing, placing the characters with AIDS, and the associated physical depictions and presence of the characters on stage. This feature assists the delivery of information about AIDS to simultaneously hold emotional resonance. Kramer’s decision to leave this piece of staging

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unaltered in the revived version illustrates the importance given in the original production of the physical depictions of AIDS on stage. In staging the play this way Kramer is deliberately highlighting the physical implications of AIDS in his revived version of *Angels*. In some ways the change in staging is a greater challenge to depicting the physical elements of AIDS. In the revived production the audience are not in such close quarters as they had been in the Cottesloe; however, the Broadway production managed to convey the physical aspects effectively, as does Kramer in the revived version despite staging it in a much larger space. As in the previous production, Kramer’s staging included depictions of the physical impact of AIDS on the bodies of characters. As in the original production both Roy and Prior are shown suffering physical effects of their illness. Kramer shows the KS markers on their skin; he shows them weakened by illness and suffering from coughs and collapses in a similar manner to the original production. There is an element, given the staging in a larger, proscenium arch venue, that the performance may have been made ‘bigger’ or ‘more dramatic’ in order to convey these nuances to a larger audience situated further away than in the intimate confines of the Cottesloe. Kramer’s staging managed to convey these physical effects while still maintaining an element of the realistic. Shona Craven’s review highlights this, saying that it: ‘conveys the physical and emotional suffering of its characters with an intensity that is at times almost overwhelming.’ 751 This review illustrates that the production succeeded in depicting AIDS physically in a way that confronted the audience with the condition. In so doing, the physicality of AIDS took centre stage again in Kramer’s revival.

The confrontation of an audience with the medical aspects of AIDS becomes a more pertinent issue in the revival. The medical depiction is more significant this time around, firstly for the awareness raising element. As highlighted in the introduction to this chapter, the public awareness of AIDS had shifted since the play was first performed. Originally performed at the height of AIDS awareness, which came both through government education campaigns and press coverage, the audience awareness and perceptions had changed between 1993/4 when *Angels* was first staged and 2007, when the revival took place. The portrayal of the medical effects of AIDS in the context of *Angels* also functions as a historicising element, a reminder of the impact the condition had before current treatments and understanding of the condition were available. Kramer approaches this effectively, with several direct and unreserved depictions of the effects of AIDS on the characters.

These depictions include Roy’s consultation with his Doctor,\textsuperscript{752} which again includes the bare medical facts. These facts functioned as a useful educational tool in the original production, at that point advising people who perhaps were not yet educated on the subject of the wider effects of AIDS. In 2007, this function is still important - perhaps more so as AIDS awareness had fallen somewhat from public consciousness. This basic information about the biology of the condition is useful to those audience members who have never encountered the kind of direct information that was prominent with public awareness campaigns around the time of the original production.\textsuperscript{753}

5.2.4 Characters with AIDS in revival

The characters with AIDS in\textit{Angels} are once again significant in creating an emotional connection with the audience. How the audience in a revived piece connects with two characters that, for different reasons, are much embedded in their original time-frame, represents a challenge in reviving the play. The relationship between depictions of AIDS and an audience’s empathy and understanding is not as simple as the depiction of the disease itself.

Prior Walter, who was discussed extensively in Chapter Three, forms the centre of the play. With the progression of cultural depictions of gay men within theatre, television film and literature as highlighted earlier in this chapter, it is pertinent to ask: is Prior Walter now a dated depiction of a gay man? Prior is a little camp but not too camp, he isn’t promiscuous, he wears drag but only in a dream, Prior’s character however, is still a complex fleshed out representation of a gay man. Alongside him, the other gay characters may begin to look like stereotypes: the camp black drag queen, the middle class respectable Jewish man who reflects the playwright, the closeted man who eventually comes out, and the closeted character who denies all things homosexual.

Roy Cohn has a more complicated emotional connection with the audience; he remains a despicable character to his death. This is made more poignant by the fact Cohn is a real life figure. In the revived version of the text – 2007 being twenty one years after his death - this is further complicated by audience potentially being alienated by lack of knowledge of the man. Cohn, though not as well known in Britain as he was in America

\textsuperscript{752} Kushner,\textit{Millennium} Act 1 Scene 9 p 29, 1994.

\textsuperscript{753} In 1993-5 when Angels was first staged, the British AIDS awareness campaigns, as with other countries such as America were still prominent.
when *Angels* was first staged, was at least potentially recognisable to some audience members at that time. As Freddie Rokem explores, there is a special relationship between actors performing ‘real’ characters on stage. I argue, following Rokem, that this becomes further emphasised in revival. In Rokem’s reading, actors become the ‘things’ that perform history when creating historical figures on stage. When performing historical figures in a revival, these actors and characters are also ‘ghosted’, to use Carlson’s terminology, by the previous performance. In portraying the character of Roy in Britain in 2007, there is a complex relationship with the audience.

By 2007, the minimal awareness there was in Britain of Roy Cohn as a real life figure was likely to lessen Kushner’s desired political significance for the character, whom Kushner intended to use to make a statement about 1980s politics. He could now, however, stand as an abstract figure indicative of the Right Wing politics of the era without an audience necessarily needing extensive knowledge of his real life activities. This seems to be Kramer’s intention, who did not include biographical information about Cohn in the programme as the National Theatre had done in the original production. This, in effect, frees Kramer’s production from some of the constraints of Cohn’s character, allowing this production to explore the dynamics of Roy as an antagonist figure, and further to look at the wider implications of an unlikeable figure with AIDS.

The idea of Cohn as an unsympathetic or unlikable character with AIDS, then, becomes a more central issue than that of his politics. The issues of care and forgiveness that resonated so strongly around Cohn’s character in the original production, as explored in chapter one, still resonate as strongly whether Cohn is known as a public figure or not. As Belize also notes when he says ‘it isn’t easy it doesn’t count if it’s easy’\(^{754}\), the fact that Cohn’s experience does gather sympathy is testament to a successful communication of the true horrors of AIDS. An audience can feel sympathy and emotion for even the most dislikeable of characters under the influence of this portrayal of the illness. If Cohn is recognised or remembered for his real life deeds by audience members, this again does not detract from the importance of the character.


5.2.5 Politics and AIDS in Revival

The change in Cohn’s character when performed in revival is indicative of the shift in the political element of Angels. When first performed, Angels was as much a text dealing with the politics of its era, encompassing the ‘National themes’ of its subtitle, as it was the experience of the gay men also alluded to in the subtitle. In 2007, Kushner commented: ‘We are still in the Reagan era, I think’\(^{755}\), meaning that through America’s continued increasing world dominance, the world was still feeling the effects of the 1980s; and that in Kushner’s political view, the then Republican led government echoed that of Reagan.\(^{756}\) There was hope of a political shift at the time Angels was first performed; this shift, however, proved relatively short lived. There was a comparatively brief interlude of Democratic Party rule under Bill Clinton,\(^{757}\) as discussed by David Roman, in his chapter on Angels.\(^{758}\) The hope, therefore, of a more liberal American government, and the associated benefits for both people with HIV and gay people, was short lived, with the shift back to conservative politics in America. When Angels was revived in 2007, America was once again under Republican rule. In 2007, when Kushner talks of still being in the Republican era, he is referring to both the politics and to the wider impact of the Right Wing leadership which he uses Angels to speak out against.

In Britain, when Angels was first staged, the political affinity between Thatcher’s Conservative Government and Reagan’s Republican Government was strong, such that British theatre goers recognised the criticisms of Republicanism in Kushner’s text and could easily align it with their own current experience in Britain. When the revival was staged in 2007, although a Labour Government had been elected ten years earlier,\(^{759}\) British audience members over the age of 18 would still have living memory of the previous government. Many also would still be feeling the effects of it. In Britain, also, the long term effects of the lengthy Conservative reign in Government meant that, while by 2007 Britain was no longer under direct Conservative influence, the lingering socio economic implications still resonated.

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\(^{756}\) In 2007 the American president George W Bush was midway through his third term as President. The Republican led government under Bush was conservative in its outlook and the lack of progress on equality issues, the involvement in overseas conflict and the economic policies all echoed that of Reagan Era Republicanism.

\(^{757}\) Bill Clinton was elected president in 1993, just as Angels was staged in New York, he served two terms in office until 2001.


\(^{759}\) The Labour Party led by Tony Blair defeated the Conservative Government, led by John Major, in 1997. They remained in power until 2010 when a Conservative/Liberal Democrat Coalition Government led by David Cameron gained power.
in Britain: eighteen years of Conservative rule could not be undone or altered overnight. However, it is of note that Conservative right wing government was no longer the direct experience in Britain; therefore the parallels with America that existed at the time of Angels original staging were not there in 2007.

The revival is, to some degree anachronistic in its political references, particularly as the political affinity with America is slightly lost with the change of government. This makes the political facets of Angels potentially more alienating. In the original performance context, the references to politics would have been fairly recent and more to have been understood, though this cannot be either measured or taken for granted in terms of audience reception. In 2007 however, the comparatively recent setting of the play in 1992/3 meant that the potentially anachronistic elements were connections were easier for an audience. There is, as with the medical references to which these politics are linked, an assumption by the producers that the play and its politics stands without further explanation.

In revival, the political and cultural references were much more historical, requiring the use of memory and historical knowledge from audiences. However, that many may not understand the nuances of these references alters an audience interpretation of the play but does not necessarily detract from its significance. The political in Kushner’s play, despite the focus on Reagan era politics, is made in relation to AIDS. Kushner’s focus on Reagan’s political actions and the wider Republican Party attitude is drawn back to the mistreatment of people with AIDS, specifically a lack of medical treatment and awareness campaigns.

In Britain, there was not a similar political fight against the Government for AIDS awareness, AIDS research and treatment. The link between politics and AIDS was much clearer in America, with the demands for healthcare taking precedence. In Britain the political facet of AIDS was still felt through the overall fight for equality, which was seen in emergent activism groups such as Stonewall and the Terrance Higgins Trust. Both of these groups felt the effects of political choices of Conservative governments. What Angels does do, in contrast to the political tracts of previous plays in relation to AIDS such as The Normal Heart and even Rent, is open up the political issues into the wider context.

Direct political messages are therefore less effective in revival. In the original staging it was easier for British audiences to connect with the broader political philosophy than the specifics of the American Government under Reagan. In revival, with Reagan’s politics even more distant to British audiences, this becomes more important. As explored later in this
chapter, substantial cuts to the epilogue shift the political elements from direct references to a broader sweeping statement. Politics are also highlighted through the Brechtian techniques and theatricality discussed in Chapters Two and Three. This is something Kramer brought out in his production. The staging overall does not diverge from the ‘actor driven event’ that Kushner sets out in his stage directions. Kramer did, however, play on the ‘theatrical’ in the ‘theatrical illusion’ that Kushner instructs. The use of lighting created spectacular effects when the Angel descends at the end of Millennium while Roy’s ascent to Heaven towards the end of Perestroika is a spectacular theatrical moment accompanied with a show tune soundtrack.

The final vision of Roy that Kramer creates is significant to his political importance in the play, which hinges on the correlation of his sexuality and AIDS. Roy appears after his death to Joe, who has just been told by Louis that Roy is gay and has AIDS. In Joe’s vision of him, Cohn both frightens and appeases his protégé. He leaves, kissing Joe softly and saying; ‘you’ll find my friend that what you love will take you places you never dreamed you’d go.’ Roy turns around, sheds his hospital gown, replaces it with a pink sequined robe and ascends to heaven to the sound of ‘I am what I am’ the anthem from La Cage aux Folles. This turns the moment into one of triumph for Cohn, garnering applause from the audience; a kind of congratulatory welcome, albeit ironic as he accepts who he is only in death. If we accept the convention that this is Joe’s vision of Roy, Kramer has taken this scene and positioned it as a clearer message to both Joe and the audience that he must accept himself as Roy did not in life - that in none too subtle terms, as the staging suggests, he must also proclaim: ‘I am what I am.’ This theatricality, a moment dramatically altered from the original, makes as strong a political statement about Roy’s character as any of Kushner’s words do. In staging Roy’s departure Kramer uses the moment to make a strong political statement. In using reference to La Cage he makes a strong statement about Roy’s hidden sexuality. In so doing he also steers away from Roy Cohn’s actual political engagement in America, something that may have been problematic in revival, and focusing instead on his sexual identity allows Roy’s character to engage in a different sort of political discourse within Kramer’s production.

761 Roy ascends the steps to Heaven he does so to the sound of ‘I am What I Am’ from La Cage Aux Folles, an important statement on Roy’s sexuality but also adding a degree of theatricality to the scene.
762 Joe sees a vision of Roy after his death, the only encounter of a supernatural or imagined nature the audience sees from Joe across the play. Perestroika Act 5, Scene 5, 1995, p259.
763 Kushner, Perestroika Act 5, Scene 5 , 1995, p259
The general political bias of Kushner’s text is certainly translated effectively by Kramer’s 2007 production. The inherent messages of the piece are accessible to an audience whether the explicit politics of the era in which it was written still apply or not. The translation of the Reaganite era’s politics to Britain originally worked well, transposing ideas about a then Conservative leadership under Reagan’s ally Thatcher. In 2007, with Tony Blair’s Labour government in power, these parallels were not as strong and some aspects became historicized. The more general political bias is nevertheless still effectively communicated.

In shifting some of the politics through his staging, as in the example of Roy and Prior’s final speeches, Kramer’s production mediates potential political issues of outdating. In amending the staging and developing the theatricality of these scenes Kushner avoids the specific politics of the era Angels is set in and allows the political scope of the revival to be considered as relevant to audiences in 2006, as much as in the mid-1990s.

5.2.6 Press response

The original production was met with a little trepidation by the press, but also praised for both its theatrical and its narrative innovation. In responding to the revival, some reviewers focused on the production as the source of their issues with Angels rather than the text itself, such as Simon Edge’s review: ‘…not even a reduced script would work in the hands of Daniel Kramer, the young American responsible for this abysmal production.’

Within Edge’s scathing review of Kramer’s production there is a hint of his respect for the plays themselves. This is indicative of the inherent danger of reviving a play, where the new interpretation risks being found inferior to those which have gone before. Edge was clearly put off by the kinds of changes outlined in Kramer’s version of the play. Other critics, such as Charles Spencer, who also had some reservations overall about Kushner’s play, were also more specific in critiquing the production itself. Spencer says: ‘The staging is neither spectacular nor beautiful enough (the angels are particularly disappointing) nor much of the acting lacks depth and definition.’ Spencer makes comparisons with the National Theatre production, which he praised in retrospect, saying that this version ‘can't eclipse memories of the British premiere at the National in the early ’90s.’ These comments are illustrative of the significance of the original production as felt by British theatre critics, and their view that

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766 Ibid.
the newer production could not live up to the memory of what came before. However the staging of Kramer’s production was deliberately, and necessarily different to the original. In reviving a play it is often artistically desirable to distance a new version from the original. In the case of Angels the altered type of theatre space and the desire to shift slightly the political implications added to this impetus for change.

This negativity towards Kramer’s changes was not universal, however. Michael Billington, who was full of praises for Donnellan’s original, also praises the new direction, saying: ‘Daniel Kramer's revival had delivered plenty that was impressive: daring staging, vigorous dialogue and terrific acting.’ But Billington’s comments indicate, in their isolation, the reluctance by the British press to embrace another version of what may have been considered an iconic original production. If this is the case, the changes that Kramer made are not themselves to blame, moreover, the critics in question would not accept any ‘alternative’ version of the iconic original production.

This reluctance may also tie in with the view, expressed by several critics, that the play itself was perhaps too much rooted in its time to withstand revival. Edge does iterate that the play itself was an important work, saying: ‘It is hard to overstate the impact of Tony Kushner’s AIDS drama when it appeared in two instalments in 1992 and 1993.’ This illustrates some of the consternation various critics felt in relation to Kushner’s Angels. The sense from many was that the original production was hitting a cultural and political moment. This idea or elevation of the original production, or a kind of enshrining of the play, coloured many critics’ comments and possibly audience viewings of the play. The significance of the cultural moment of the original production also had a strong effect on some, impacting upon the critical reading of this revival, as Charles Spencer describes. Comparing the two productions, he says of the original:

But then Kushner was writing at a time of panic, when Aids seemed like an old-fashioned plague visited on the prosperous, hedonistic West. His play is a protracted cry of anguish, ripped from the heart.

Spencer had reservations about some of the content of Angels when originally staged, but what he indicates as important is the manner in which Kushner captured a particular moment in history. Kushner was writing out of a need to be heard, on the subject of a particular issue,

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767 Ibid.
769 Spencer, Charles, Angels in America Review; The Daily Telegraph, 28th June, 2007
at a particular time. The AIDS issue had far from vanished entirely by 2007 and it is
debatable to even say it had diminished, but it had altered. To audiences, and critics, in 2007
there may be question around Angels’ relevance, or how it may fit into the current theatrical
and cultural landscape. In questioning the significance of the play in revival, or specifically in
this incarnation, therefore, the critics do not detract from the power or significance of
Kushner’s work but, as seen in Spencer’s words above, suggest that perhaps the moment of
its importance has passed.

Paul Taylor’s review of the revival, on the other hand, considers Angels to be
‘marvellously in tune with its theatrical daring, generosity of outlook, wicked wit, and
visionary humanism.’\textsuperscript{770} Taylor goes on to comment on, or perhaps challenge, charges that
may be levelled at Angels in its restaging, saying:

Though an equivalently urgent play would now be about “Angels in Africa”, the advent
of antiretroviral medication no more d
ates Kushner’s epic than a cure for syphilis has
outmoded Ibsen’s Ghosts.\textsuperscript{771}

Taylor illustrates here that reviving a play, even if it is historically outdated, is nevertheless
not a futile exercise. Taylor’s response offers the case for a revival that the content remains
relevant despite the passing time. The historical significance of the piece acts as a reminder of
a moment in history for audiences, whether they agree with Kushner’s political bias or not.

Returning to Simon Edge’s review, he recognises the significance of a revival: ‘offering an
opportunity to see the entire work in one go is a chance to assess whether it stands the test of
time.’\textsuperscript{772} However, while he considers this significant, the conclusion he comes to is: ‘Sadly,
the answer is no.’\textsuperscript{773} This conclusion is rare among the reviewers in 2007. Most criticism
comes from an issue with the writing or directing itself rather than whether the play is
suitable for today’s audiences.

Billington also offers a counter argument to the view Angels is somehow less relevant
today. He does not consider the play to be dated to the point of irrelevance. In fact, Billington
makes a point of illustrating the importance of the play both theatrically and in terms of its
wider political and cultural statements, saying: ‘It's historically important because it restored
theatrical imagination, political aggro and social size to an American theatre where they were

\textsuperscript{771} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{772} Edge, Simon, AIDS angels are a test of endurance, The Express, London, 29th June, 2007.
\textsuperscript{773} Ibid.
almost totally missing." Billington recognises the theatrical legacy of *Angels* therefore its significance for a moving evolution of American theatre; and therefore its contribution in British theatre alongside this. In addition, he also references the significance of the themes that Kushner highlights: ‘And the first, stronger part, which Kushner called “Millennium Approaches”, is packed with a foreboding which, when the porous ozone layer is invoked, now seems all too justified.’ Billington here is drawing attention to two facets of *Angels* that have formed a basis to this study - the theatrical importance of the performance text and the wider socio-political message that Kushner conveys with his text.

As explored in this analysis, the text of *Angels* remains both accessible to audiences and significant despite the shift in understanding and in other cultural depictions of AIDS by 2007. In drawing attention to both facets in his review, Billington is illustrating how these continue to be significant in revival. With the distance of the revival, the play can now be seen separately from the political and social issues relating to AIDS that were urgent at the time. Because critics are separated from the political urgency of the piece, and the raw nature of the emotive issues dealt with, they can now look at *Angels* with, it is proposed, a more measured eye. In so doing they are able to assess both the content as illustrated here, and to consider Kushner’s dramatic style.

The revival, then, provided opportunity for critique of the dramatic style as well as content. Although the changes were not as substantial as in the *Rent* revival, the production was quite different to the original. In *Angels* there were stylistic changes reflecting Kramer’s personal taste. These are smaller changes related to costume and character development. Larger changes were motivated by necessity of making changes to suit for the new type of venue as well as the artistic motivation of director Kramer which meant that the style of direction was different. Some changes were made to accommodate shifts in politics Roy’s ascent to heaven and Prior’s invocation to the audience specifically. Other changes were more subtle, helping Kramer to highlight elements such as emotional connections between characters, or helping audiences to connect to the characters. These smaller changes cannot be fully quantified as they were subtle changes in direction giving this version an identity separate to the original London production. These changes result in a production that is recognisable as the same play, but with slightly different dramatic style, keeping the basic

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775 Ibid.
integrity of the piece—unlike the radical overhaul of *Rent* and allowing critics to consider both the merits of this production and the play itself.

The new production, for some, highlighted shortcomings that perhaps were not visible in the original production, or were ignored in favour of praising Kushner for addressing important and urgent issues. Mark Shenton comments about the political significance of *Angels* when first staged, saying: ‘Angels in America was first seen at the National Theatre. No wonder that its cry about gay men's political powerlessness was so arresting and radical then.’ He therefore recognises the significance of *Angels* as a production calling it: ‘[T]his alternately verbose and profound, grandiose and playful play’, before going on to say: ‘Daniel Kramer's over-inflated production that oddly leaves you feeling ultimately deflated.’ Here Shenton was finding fault with both the play itself and Kramer’s direction of the revival. Illustrating that the changes to the production, in comparison to the original minimalist production, were felt to over-complicate an already complicated piece of theatre.

Many comments on Kramer’s production focused on the length of the play, and its dramatic structure. Charles Spencer remarks: ‘It also seemed clear that the play would greatly benefit from being cut to half its present running time.’ He is finding fault not with Kramer’s production, but with the length of the play, as does Quentin Letts referring to it as the ‘impractically long *Angels in America* (seeing both parts, including breaks, will steal more than nine hours from your life)’. He here highlights the problems with the length which involves a big time commitment required for audience members to invest in *Angels* as well as financial commitment of two sets of tickets. A piece of such length also needs to be engaging for an audience in order to succeed in holding their attention. The reviewers’ comments here then, although focused on the actual writing, indicate that Kramer’s production did little to create an engaging piece of theatre from Kushner’s writing. Had Kramer’s production been more engaging then the review response, and feelings about the length may have been different.

Another factor related to the commentary on length when considering the response in revival, is that there has been a trend towards shorter plays in recent years, as highlighted by

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777 Ibid.
778 Ibid.
780 Letts, Quentin, *If only these Angels had stayed in America*, The Daily Mail, London, 29th June, 2007.
Rob Sharp in his 2011 article\(^{781}\), with shorter interval free pieces being more of a feature in theatres than in previous years.\(^{782}\) Therefore, *Angels* with its extreme length would stand out. This reflects the greater criticism of its content and dramatic structure in the revived version. This was partly because for some critics *Angels* was no longer in keeping with what they considered current trends and strengths of a drama. Christopher Hart saying; ‘[It] has no decent narrative’,\(^{783}\) and goes on to deride the production further, saying, ‘[T]here's a dearth of intellectual substance that no amount of feathers or lightning bolts can disguise.’\(^{784}\) Hart is drawing attention to what he views as shortcomings in Kushner’s narrative and Kramer’s production. It is true that the new production was a bigger, it might be said ‘flashier’ production than the original. Incorporating, as Hart notes, special effects such as lightning bolts and a dramatic sequence in which black feathers fell covering the stage and some of the audience. Kramer’s production retained much of the ethos of the original production using actor driven scene changes, and uncomplicated portable sets however Kramer did add elements of dramatic flair. This augmentation and approach to the production could be viewed as adding to, rather than detracting from the problems that the reviewers had with the script. For some reviewers in a piece where the writing was felt to be overblown and unnecessarily complex, the addition of spectacle within the production did little to counter this feeling. This is a sentiment echoed by Simon Edge expresses when he says:

> Kushner padded [the plays] with fantasy sequences, wordy monologues and long theological meditations which were inventive at the time but seem shamelessly indulgent when the two parts are run together in this seven-hour marathon.\(^{785}\)

Edge here synthesises the issues found with both Kushner’s writing and the direction from Kramer when *Angels* was revived. Some reviewers therefore felt the writing was not as refined, the play not as succinct as they would prefer, and the directorial approach emphasising this further. In part this is perhaps a reflection of changing fashions in plays and direction, another kind of fond recollection of a standout original production that will leave a revival always lacking in the eyes of some.

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\(^{781}\) Sharp, Rob, *Don't bother booking a drink – its curtains for the interval*, *The Independent*, London, 28th February 2011.

\(^{782}\) Caryl Churchill’s *Drunk Enough to Say I Love You* (2006) which premiered at the Royal Court the year before *Angels* was revived is an example. One of the first plays to not feature an interval in the West End was Yazmin Reza’s *Art* in 1996.


\(^{784}\) Ibid.

However, with a greater time and distance from the issues discussed in Kushner’s text, these reviews are more inclined to reflect instead on content of the writing as well as the dramatic effect. At the extreme end of the spectrum, one review went as far as saying: ‘The fact is that this play now looks very dated indeed. I can’t honestly see it being revived again.’\textsuperscript{786} Walker’s review, though containing this extreme and somewhat sweeping declaration, draws on those perceived shortcomings mentioned by other critics; that \textit{Angels} was now less relevant and dramatically uninteresting.

Susanna Clapp finds fault with is Kushner’s original work rather than its new incarnation: ‘Actually, the panache of the production mostly underlines the windiness of Kushner’s writing.’\textsuperscript{787} The use of ‘underlines’ in her review indicates the importance of production, and the criticism of production in revival. Instead of focusing on the ideas of Kushner’s piece as many of the original reviews did, now there was a focus on, as Clapp puts it, the underlying problems. The fact that critics were drawing out elements of production and of Kushner’s writing indicates that they had taken a step back from the ideas presented to look more at the manner in which they were presented.

There was also, however, consideration of where \textit{Angels} lay both in terms of the current theatrical landscape and its place in relation to its original production and theatrical history. Some critics acknowledged its faults as a production or as a play, but still regarded the content of Kushner’s work worthy of attention:

If the occasional longueurs and patches of prolixity are more noticeable now than they were when Declan Donellan unveiled the piece at the National Theatre, this fresh account demonstrates that the passage of time has not clipped \textit{Angels}’ wings.\textsuperscript{788} Taylor indicates that \textit{Angels}, even though its faults are now more visible it is still a relevant piece of theatre. In noting that in this production faults are visible Taylor may not be directly criticising Kramer’s direction but in fact noting that now that the moment of excitement at the original has past, hindsight and reflection highlight its faults. Not all critics, therefore, were totally scathing in their review of the direction and performance. It seemed that with the new production and with the distance that reviving a piece allows - particularly considering the emotive and potentially controversial nature of \textit{Angels} - a more balanced assessment of its theatrical prowess was emerging in the 2007 reviews.

\textsuperscript{787} Ibid
Yet, overall reviewers, then, did not respond as favourably to Angels in revival as they had to the original production. Angels is a challenging play both for those staging it and the audiences watching. Its only full London revival in 2007 illustrated this through the mixed critical response it received. This analysis of the Headlong/Lyric Hammersmith production in 2007 has, through considering the theatrical landscape and reconsidering the textual and production content of Angels, shown a great deal of the text to be relevant and accessible to audiences. The theatrical landscape, as illustrated in the examples cited, showed an on-going British theatrical interest in American texts, many of which were leading the field critically and commercially. In considering the text again from the perspective of Daniel Kramer’s production it is clear that while, yes, some aspects are less accessible so long after the period in history Kushner depicts, the play loses little of its complexity or accessibility for audiences. It is also of note that the reviewers who did not take issue with the production itself were more forgiving about the enduring importance of Kushner’s text itself.

5.2.6 Reviving Angels

Angels in revival was challenging in some respects, its depictions of AIDS now historicized and its political message altered by the intervening years. Kramer had approached the text with as fresh and personal an approach as possible, attempting to fulfill Kushner’s desire that: ‘Theatre can tell you things it couldn’t if you were conscious and acting in the world, then hopefully you take the world you see into the real world if it moved you.’789 With Angels now further removed from the socio-political context on which it commented, the emphasis became on using the play, and its historical commentary, as a tool for commenting on the present day. Therefore, in approaching Angels for revival Kramer altered it slightly to provide a more contemporary perspective. With the permission of Kushner various minor alterations were made across the play.

The most extensive change to Kramer’s production comes in the Epilogue. Having returned from Heaven, Prior and the other central characters - Louis, Belize and Hannah - congregate at the Bethesda fountain in New York.790 Kushner’s stage directions clearly mark out the time and place of the scene;791 and in addition Prior mentions both time and place in

790 The Bethesda Fountain in New York’s Central Park is a part of a terrace area constructed 1859-64. The fountain, as Louis mentions earlier in the play, commemorates naval dead of the Civil War.
791 The heading of this scene is marked as ‘Bethesda February, 1990’ Kushner, Perestroika, 1995, p 277.
his dialogue: ‘it’s January 1990. I’ve been living with AIDS for five years.’ The scene continues, making reference to world events and politics that firmly ground the moment in a specific time and place. Louis, Belize and Hannah discuss the fall of the Berlin wall and the Perestroika of the title. The politics discussed serves as a useful backdrop and conclusion to Kushner’s earlier points - but it was outdated by the time Kramer’s revival was staged.

In Kushner’s conclusion, the political facets were designed to echo the characters’ emotions and status at the close of the play. The hope of ‘Perestroika’ as a political approach is used by Kushner here as a mirror of the wider hope and progress for Prior and others with AIDS. But the references to ‘Perestroika’ date the play and are potentially problematic in restaging in 2007. Many of the references are outdated or do not perhaps represent what Kushner hoped they might when he first wrote Angels. As Prior comments, ‘it’s not that what they’re saying isn’t important’ - but the message of Kushner’s play is troubled by their inclusion. Instead of this long epilogue, therefore, with its anachronistic messages of hope relating to lost political systems, Kramer shortens the scene to only include Prior’s direct address to the audience. This is important both to give a dramatic structure that communicates effectively to British audiences in 2007, and also to offer the message about AIDS that Kushner seemed to seek in his epilogue.

What Kramer shows instead of the post-dated reunion, is a scene in which Prior steps from his hospital bed from two scenes earlier to address the audience:

This disease will be the end of many of us, but not nearly all, and the dead will be commemorated and will struggle on with the living, and we are not going away. We won’t die secret deaths anymore. The world only spins forward. We will be citizens. The time has come.

Bye now. You are fabulous creatures each, and every one. And I bless you: More life. The Great work begins.

Prior’s speech here acts an invocation to the audience. It breaks the fourth wall and brings the cause of AIDS in the play into the present day, as the cause of the audience. The scene is described by Ron Scapp as a: ‘Hegelian moment as it compels us to face the negation of the

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792 Kushner, Perestroika, 1995, p278. The date Prior gives is incongruous with the time stamp on the previous page, but the year and real life events described in the scene mark this approximate time as accurate.

793 Kushner, Perestroika, Epilogue, 1995, p 280

794 Prior’s story within the play resolves in Act five scene 7 of Perestroika following this Joe and Harper have a scene together. Following this there are monologues from Roy (potentially in Heaven) and Harper (on a flight to San Francisco).

795 Kushner, Perestroika, Epilogue, 1995, p 280
state of things along with the preservation of the very spirit of the state of things along with the things themselves.\textsuperscript{796} In altering the staging of this scene Kramer firstly is able to shift focus from the political era of the original production. In so doing the politics of the revival become less anachronistic, and opens up the specific politics of Kushner’s original script to a broader discussion of politics applicable to 2007. In this moment, Kushner can be viewed as making the cause of people with AIDS the cause of the audience. This works, again as described by Scapp, by situating the fantasy and the play as part of the history.\textsuperscript{797} what Angels appeals to and promotes is a promise of better days, not just a repetition of the fantasy.\textsuperscript{798} In a moment of emotional solidarity we begin again; in Kushner’s play, the audience is gathered by the actors as a crowd of fabulous citizens.

Kramer’s staging sees a shift from the ‘Epilogue’ of the original, in which the main characters\textsuperscript{799} gather at the Bethesda fountain five years after the end of the main action. In the original production, during this scene, they discuss the political matters of the time, including the ‘Perestroika’ of the title. In Kramer’s version Prior gets up from his bed at the end of Act Five Scene Eight, and delivers an edited version of his lines from the Epilogue. Dispensing with the preceding context, updates on the characters’ lives, and political context, Kramer simply stages Prior delivering his final invocation to the audience. He tells them; ‘This disease will be the end of many of us, but not nearly all’\textsuperscript{800}, bringing the focus back to the AIDS epidemic. The staging here shifts the focus to a conversation between Prior and the audience rather than between the five characters as in the original. He then turns directly to the audience, telling them ‘You are fabulous creatures each and every one. And I bless you: More life’\textsuperscript{801}. In drawing out the address to the audience Kramer focuses this scene, and so the close of the play, this invocation to the audience. This decision is also indicative of Kramer’s personal approach to staging. In the final act of the play Kushner notes in his instructions that scenes six and nine can be cut for timing\textsuperscript{802}. However Kramer opted to keep these scenes in his production indicating the cuts to the Epilogue were through artistic motivation rather than timing. It allows Kramer to at once sidestep potentially problematic political references and refines the focus of the final scene, through this staging, to Prior, and his battle with AIDS.

\textsuperscript{796} Scapp in Geis and Kruger, 1998, p 95
\textsuperscript{797} Scapp in Geis and Kruger, 1998, p 92
\textsuperscript{798} Scapp in Geis and Kruger, 1998, p 90
\textsuperscript{799} Prior, Louis, Belize and Hannah.
\textsuperscript{800} Kushner, \textit{Perestroika}, Epilogue, p 280.
\textsuperscript{801} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{802} Kushner, Tony, \textit{Angels in America; Perestroika, Playwrights notes}, 1994, np.
This scene, while in its altered form serving the setting of the revival, also returns to the Brechtian roots of Kushner’s play. Prior’s address, the breaking of the fourth wall, and political address are all representative of the Brechtian influences on Kushner, and Kramer’s production draws them out. Bookending *Perestroika* are two scenes that draw on Kushner’s Brechtian approaches; act one scene one where the ‘World’s oldest living Bolshevik’ delivers a speech before the action of the play recommences. A moment seemingly unconnected to the narrative it takes the audience out of the familiar story and delivers a political message. Although not a purely Brechtian approach *Angels* draws on the Brechtian Epic theatre traditions. Similarly the final scene, described above, where Prior addresses the audience directly breaking the fourth wall, is a Brechtian technique, the audience at this moment made acutely aware they are watching a play, and encouraged to take its message with them as they leave for the ‘real world’. Kramer’s staging here, as described, emphasises this, placing the focus clearly on Prior’s direct address to the audience and dispensing with the other aspects of this scene.

The alteration to the text by Kramer in this production removes the anachronistic looking forward to the future from 1990, which might have alienated a modern audience and focuses instead on the position of Prior as a man with AIDS in 1985. This focuses the audience’s attention on Kushner’s central issues, those of AIDS and of a sense of community. Both issues defy the constraints of chronology and therefore offer a more fitting end to the play than the discussion of long-defunct politics that framed the original ending. 803 This, as well, creates a more open version of the play. We are not told, as in the original, that Prior lived at least another five years. The lack of specificity also allows an audience to transpose their reactions into their own experience rather than compartmentalising what they see as historical. Robert Vorlicky, commenting on the original production, says that Kushner is not in the business of prescribing what his audience should take away from his play. This means, according to Vorlicky, that they do not want to be told what to think. 804 Kushner achieves this through his narrative action, which both confronts an audience with the reality of AIDS and creates an emotional connection, rather than positioning private and public systems of experience as the audience watch Kushner make explicit how the two interact.

Kramer’s production of *Angels* managed to update and transcend the potentially anachronistic nature of the text. Kramer’s depiction of AIDS and the power of the production

to connect with an audience to the text illustrated that there was still potential significance in 
reviving the text, making the play worth staging in Britain in 2007. The press response to the 
text reflected this. Reviews also highlighted the aspects that still did not translate to a British 
audience, or that had been somewhat lessened in terms of significance for London theatre 
over time. It is fitting that Hutcheon in her analysis of adaptation uses a quotation from 
Angels to illustrate her point about the desire to continually revisit old stories.

Using Prior’s declaration, ‘We are not rocks-progress, we desire. Even if all we desire 
is stillness, it’s still desire for. Even if we go faster than we should. We can’t wait. And Wait 
for what?’ Hutcheson asserts that the desire for stories revisited is part of a universal 
human condition. Her use of Prior’s lines from Perestroika indicates that Angels as a text is 
in fact one predisposed to revisiting and revival. The changes inherent to revival and which 
are explored here, are found in the lines that Hutcheson quotes. Even in revisiting Kushner’s 
text as Kramer did in 2007, as Prior describes, there is a desire to keep moving that text 
forward. In reviving, and adapting the play for its re-staging, Kramer’s version fulfils both 
the desire for the ‘same’ stories, and the desire for continued change Hutcheson discusses. In 
terms of depicting AIDS on the British stage, the awareness of these two facets helps a 
British audience continue to be affected by it.

5.3 Reviving Rent

In 2006, Rent was revived in a radically different format in London’s West End. 
Billed as Rent: Remixed, the version staged was drastically altered in both staging and 
musical arrangement from previous versions. At this time Rent was still running on 
Broadway, and a film version had been made and was released in the UK later that year. Rent had already had a sustained life in the UK as well as in America and, therefore, it was 
significant it was being brought back to the West End even while the original version was 
clearly still prominent, both in theatrical cultural memory and in actual presence on 
Broadway and on film. There had been scepticism about the success of the original London 
production, but the booking of a West End Theatre illustrated a vote of confidence by 
producers that Rent: Remixed was a marketable commodity. What the producers also sought

805 Kushner, T, Perestroika, 1994, p 132, quoted in Hutcheon, Linda, A Theory of Adaptation, Routledge, 
806 Columbus, Chris, Rent, Screenplay by Stephen Chbosky and Jonathan Larson, Sony Pictures, USA, 2005.
807 Rent was licenced for amateur and touring productions in America and had several national tours in both 
countries. It was also being produced at an amateur and schools version.
to do in this revival was to update or, as they put it, ‘remix’ the original production, for a contemporary audience. In the context of Rent: Remixed, the term takes on two meanings: both in the context of remixing the music used and in the wider cultural in the changes made to the text as a whole.

5.3.1 Context

Rent is one of only a handful of musicals to deal with AIDS, very few of which have seen more than one production in British theatre. William Finn’s Falsettoland has had only its initial London production and few regional productions, while Elegies for Angels Punks and Raging Queens saw a small scale revival in 2010 in a London fringe venue, which also starred Leon Lopez, who played Angel in Rent: Remixed. Elegies is essentially a revue show rather than being considered a full musical, while Falsettoland, the only other musical to take AIDS as a major theme, has never had a West End run.

5.3.2 The Production

Rent: Remixed was directed and conceived by William Baker, most well known for being Kylie Minogue’s concert director, and designed by Mark Bailey, known for his theatrical work across opera, ballet and various plays and musicals in the West End. The piece was drastically altered from Larson’s original, with changes to set, character and orchestration that rendered parts of it unrecognisable from the original. Baker includes a ‘Then and now’ section in the programme in an attempt to explain the rationale for the update. He focuses on AIDS, saying: ‘Rent was unique in its frankness in dealing with the AIDS epidemic.’ Baker is correct in this, as shown in Chapter 4; Rent’s approach in dealing with AIDS was indeed innovative. Baker’s comment that Rent was unique in dealing with AIDS can, in fact, be applied to both Rent and Angels; their innovation in depicting

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808 The term ‘remix’ was originally applied to music to designate an alternate or altered version of an original piece of music. The term has widened to apply to other cultural outputs including film and literature.
811 Finn, William and Lapine, James, Falsettoland, 1995.
813 Mark Bailey’s credits include, work on Opera for the Royal Opera House, musicals such as ‘Into the Woods’ and work for the National Theatre and Clwyd full details can be found on his website: <www.markbailey.org.uk/Site/Welcome.html>
814 Baker, W. Then and now, Rent Remixed programme, 2006, np.
AIDS, as explored earlier, supports the rationale for re-staging them. There are palpable differences in their approach, and in the revivals of the texts; however, the difference, yet importance, of both texts in depicting AIDS is demonstrated.

Baker goes on to say that: ‘There’s no question that the AIDS issue has changed.’ Baker’s reasoning is sound. AIDS as an issue had changed dramatically in the time since Rent was first staged, as outlined at the beginning of this chapter. He then asks: ‘But has our awareness of it stagnated so much that not only are we not shocked by it but we have become numb to it?’ These points are valid questions, and a good reason for any revival of Rent. They also perhaps present a basis for some alterations, in order to make certain aspects of the text more accessible. If considered alongside Angels this is, in fact, sound reasoning for re-staging both. If AIDS had fallen from the cultural radar somewhat, then staging plays depicting AIDS becomes relevant once more.

As has been said above, the changes Baker made to Rent for his remixed version were extensive, all of which added up to a very different experience of Rent for audiences to previous productions. It is important to state that Baker is not the first to make minor changes to the production, although most productions follow the set and costumes of the original Broadway/London productions. Few can replicate this exactly, however; many of the original costumes for Off Broadway/Broadway were unique.

The set had previously been a slightly scruffy representation of the East Village loft in which Mark and Roger are supposed to live, both in the original Broadway production and subsequently the London production. This was made with a series of grey metallic poles and ledges, reminiscent of scaffolding or the bare steel girders of a building. The loft and the surrounding areas were created with minimal furniture, mostly two large metal tables, a couple of chairs and a Christmas tree made of scrap metal. In Baker’s version, however, Mark Bailey’s set was as stark white with a raised platform in the centre to represent the apartment, furnished with stylish contemporary looking furniture. Sets were moved into the space to represent venues such as the Life Café in La Vie Bohème, which in the original was created out of the existing set pieces and/or props brought on by cast members. The only

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815 Ibid.
816 Ibid.
817 As with Angels I viewed this production live and in person, making detailed notes on staging and direction. The archival materials are used in the course of this research to support my own notes and experience.
818 The Life Café was a real venue in New York’s East Village, the walls papered with covers from ‘Life’ magazine, it was frequented by Larson often. The Life Café, despite being a place of pilgrimage for many Rent fans, closed in 2011.
real similarity with the original design was the band, which was situated on stage alongside the actors.

Stage design can have a marked effect on the production. In *Rent*, the original sparse set and the slightly grubby air it lent the production was a deliberate attempt to re-create the East Village setting. The new design was met with criticism from many reviews, including several who felt that it did not reflect the ethos of *Rent*. As noted by one: ‘inhabitants of this Alphabet City are hardly slumming it, on a chic white multi-levelled set by Mark Bailey.’

The changes to the set alter immediately the audience’s perception and the interaction they have with a production.

Baker appeared to be situating the play in a kind of indeterminate location, which also fuelled his direction of and characterisation across the play. He allowed actors, notably those playing Mimi and Maureen to keep their British and Irish accents respectively, while others seemed to attempt something in between. Baker could perhaps be seen in this approach to be attempting to replicate Larson’s multi-cultural approach; however in a show so overtly set in New York, this style confused the matter. Arguing in favour of Baker, it can be suggested that this allows a British audience to connect with *Rent*, feeling that through the accents of the characters there is a direct line to the locality. It is also feasible that the young, trendy East Village, of a seemingly indeterminable point in time that Baker depicts could indeed have British or Irish inhabitants.

Baker’s casting was far less diverse than the original cast. While he could not necessarily have been expected to cast to the exact specifications of the original, the changes made by Baker were significant in altering the diversity that had been a major factor in Michael Grief’s version, and a factor which had no doubt appealed to widely underrepresented ethnic groups in British theatre. This was an issue in Baker’s production in terms of connection with an audience, but also in terms of the legacy of *Rent*. The original Broadway cast had become iconic in terms of the characters. Carlson talks of the problems in competing with an actor who has put their mark upon a role; this is to be expected in revival, and a successful production or talented actor will succeed in putting their mark upon the role. Many actors had of course stepped into these, as Carlson refers to them, ‘ghosted’ roles but within the same production (be it Broadway or the original London production), and

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these new actors were invariably physically and vocally similar to the original cast. In replacing cast members within a long-running show, there is generally a desire to mimic the original actor; in revival this can be altered so that a new interpretation of the character can be depicted. But in Baker’s production the replacements weren’t strong enough to eclipse the originals and put their own ‘stamp’ on the roles.

The changes to the set and cast raise questions of authenticity: should the ‘real’ Rent adhere to the same principles of design and casting of the original? If it does not, is it ‘really’ Rent, or a different text? In reviving a text, there is always scope for reinvention and alteration to fit changing needs in a practical sense, for example scaling down a production to fit a smaller venue. Likewise in terms of demographics, international productions may not have the diversity of actors available to fill these roles (for example a South American or Chinese production of Rent may struggle to fulfil the diverse ethnicities of the original cast). However, in the British revival none of these were factors. This returns then to the question of ‘authenticity’. Does a production of Rent need to adhere to certain principles of production in order to be considered authentic? In the largest sense, no, Rent is not defined by its set, casting or costume. However certain facets, including music and narrative clarity, are required to produce a version of Rent that is true to the original. It is in these areas that Rent: Remixed became problematic. While there is room for alteration and even updating, as Kramer did with Angels, Baker’s alterations undeniably substantially affected the presentation of Rent and its depiction of AIDS.

5.3.3 Depictions of AIDS in revival

The depictions of AIDS in Rent are not detailed or graphic in terms of physical or medical depictions. In this, Rent differs from other AIDS texts, including Angels - as outlined in relation to the original productions. The depiction of AIDS and communication with an audience in Rent is achieved more in relation to building empathy in the audience with the characters, and showing the social and emotional effects that stem from the physical aspects of the condition, than depicting that condition in detail. Baker’s production did not drastically alter the text in this sense as much as Kramer’s production of Angels did. The content of Rent was essentially identical in terms of narrative content; the essential story remained untouched. However, the substantial changes to staging and, most significantly, musical arrangement means that the depiction of AIDS in Rent: Remixed is altered.
As Baker highlights in his ‘Then and now’ section noted above: ‘There’s no question that the AIDS issue has changed.’

The comment is sound, his execution of this idea in the play, however, was perhaps questionable. It is clear that we do live in a very different world today: young people aren’t afraid of AIDS as Larson’s generation, or the next generation who queued for Rent were. Baker then asks: ‘But has our awareness of it stagnated so much that not only are we not shocked by it but we have become numb to it?’ Again it is possible to acknowledge that he has a point: AIDS has become - to borrow Crimps’ phrase - ‘normalised’, meaning that young people do not necessarily understand the seriousness of the condition. These points are valid considerations for any revival of Rent, and perhaps present a basis for some alterations, to make certain aspects of the text more accessible. However, it is argued that what Baker did, in terms of staging and re-orchestration, actually muted the existing depictions of AIDS within Rent.

The element of minimal physical depiction of AIDS in Rent is useful in revival, allowing for minimal alienation or confusion of an audience when confronting them with outdated medical information. As noted, when he wrote Angels, Kushner deliberately kept his play a few years prior to the present day, and this writing back allowed the depiction of medical elements to be kept at a fixed point in time, one that was not subject to question or change in relation to medical advances. In Rent, audiences may assume a similar effect: Larson began the production years earlier, and also set the musical several years earlier than its performance. The actual content of the piece was, as outlined in the previous analysis of Rent, outdated to British audiences when it was originally performed, being by this time ten years old in terms of content. This gap, particularly in relation to medical depictions, is substantial. This was also the case with Angels. Unlike Kushner’s play, the level of detail and specificity of references in Rent make the piece more immediately historical in nature. This makes it arguably less accessible for British audiences. It was, as previously argued, the effective use of an innovative musical style that successfully communicated and connected British audiences to the depictions of AIDS in Rent.

In Rent: Remixed there appears to be a further ‘glossing over’ of the effects of AIDS on the characters in contrast to the grittier approach of the original. This is highlighted by a

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821 Baker, Rent: Remixed programme, 2007, np
822 The original production of Rent did not have a ‘timestamp’ on it however in the film version Rent is cited as beginning in 1989. This timestamp was then adopted by Michael Grief’s New York revival in 2011.
823 If the above date of 1989 is agreed upon as the intended setting for Larson’s work, which as it is based on Larson’s notes and conversations with actors and director Grief it should be. In 1998 therefore when Rent was first performed in Britain, it was over a decade old in terms of content.
particular set piece in which the names of famous people who died of AIDS scroll ‘ticker tape’ style over the action. These were anachronistic to the setting of the play, and the time of the performance therefore could distract from the characters stories depicted. Particularly as, the power of Rent lies in an audience’s ability to engage and empathise with the impact of AIDS on the characters present. This newsreel/ticker tape of famous names therefore detracts from the story of Larson’s characters and the personal impact of AIDS that audiences previously identified with in the original production. These ‘celebrity’ deaths are far removed from the audience’s potential personal experience and, for some younger audience members in 2007, may have been names they had never heard of. This creates a distraction and alienation, whereas the characters are able to be universally empathetic. The depiction of the personal impact of AIDS within the revival was, like much of the ‘remix’ in Baker’s version, glossed over. The overall polished and glossy look of Baker’s version seems incongruous with a detailed or hard hitting depiction of AIDS.

Larson’s use of an emotional connection to characters in Rent for an audience rather than an informative one means references and details were in less danger of becoming outdated, unlike the more medically detailed Angels. Detailed references to AIDS in Rent are limited anyway, so the revival and altered form did little to diminish the effectiveness of the text with regard to its informative value. The only point at which detailed reference to AIDS is problematic in Rent is the reference to ‘AZT’ which was outdated, as noted in the earlier chapter, when Rent was first staged in Britain. With this distance, however, the piece transitions: like Angels, it becomes a historicised piece on AIDS rather than a contemporary commentary. This historicising of the piece nevertheless does not make the broader message or depictions of AIDS less valid or powerful.

Despite highlighting it in his programme notes, the depiction of AIDS seemed to be an aspect that Baker was less concerned about in his direction. The re-orchestration mentioned, along with the staging, all contributed to this. The crucial aspect of Baker’s failings in depicting AIDS actually lies in these twin aspects. For Rent, the key to its communication with audiences in relation to AIDS (along with every other issue) was its music. In addition, the changes to design removed the piece from the sense of time and place the original set afforded. All of these aspects contribute to the overall communication with

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824 The first antiretroviral drug used in HIV treatment. See Appendix 1 for detailed listings of AIDS treatment and development.
the audience, and in the case of *Rent: Remixed* the confusion or disengagement of that audience.

Baker also made substantial changes to the musical arrangement, as explored in detail below. This was seen in a change to the overall staging where the songs became less integrated, as they should be in the sung-through format of *Rent* and seemed to stop rather than further the action. In the context of the musical this also begins to affect and invalidate the rest of the piece, including characterisation and the depiction of AIDS. This approach may derive from Baker’s background in the pop music industry, in which songs are produced independently. When a singer or band produces an album, although there may be thematic or stylistic similarities, the songs do not need to relate or interconnect. Similarly, in concert staging, where Baker mainly works, concerts may have a theme even a loose storyline but songs are not explicitly linked narratively. Most significantly, Baker, as director, is responsible for the performances and the overall ‘feel’ of the piece, which critics felt was divorced from Larson and Grief’s original. In a musical, the connectivity between the songs is vital in making the piece work overall. In altering this, Baker loses the connection between the narrative content of Larson’s piece and performance, and in losing this connection the depiction of AIDS is also lost.

So the approach taken in *Rent: Remixed* in terms of depicting AIDS was lacking. Instead of highlighting the individuals with AIDS, and the impact of the condition they are faced with, this becomes muted. The sterile production design, with the whitewashed walls, along with anachronistic references in the ‘ticker tape’ design which scrolled names of AIDS victims across the set, distracted from the original identity of *Rent*. The changes to characterisation, the altering of ethnicity and identity that will be explored further in this section, all created a less powerful version of Larson’s original.

The revival version tones down the depiction of AIDS in *Rent*, which became as subdued and ‘sterile’ as the rest of the production appeared. The anachronistic and confusing setting made engagement with the characters, and subsequent depiction of AIDS, problematic. If the format had been left untouched then *Rent*, although set in another era, would have retained an authenticity of performance that was lost by altering the form and mode of delivery. In depicting AIDS, the new production was falling short of the original, something which extended also to the characters depicted. For audiences in Britain then as well as New York, *Rent* captures a time and a place, and this helps it communicate not only its message of AIDS awareness and activism but all the other messages it offers.
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### 5.3.4 Characters with AIDS

The substantial changes made by Baker directly and negatively impacted the portrayal of the characters written by Larson and the depiction of AIDS. The changes to setting and design influenced the characterisation of the piece as a whole. In making drastic changes to the characters, changing ethnicity and other vital elements of characterisation the depiction of AIDS was changed in *Rent: Remixed*. These broader changes are linked to a change to staging which glossed over some of the depictions of AIDS seen in the original, while also detracting from the impact on the characters.

The overt medical references being few, the text of *Rent* relies on a mixture of music and characterisation to communicate the effects of AIDS. While Larson’s text itself gives little in the way of detail, Michael Grief’s original direction and the performances from his cast - particularly Daphne Louise Vega as Mimi and Wilson Jermaine Heredia as Angel – gave the text a strong resonance. In *Rent: Remixed*, the combination of alterations to characterisation, outlined above, and the casting decisions left the depiction of AIDS’s effects on people and communities somewhat diminished from the original.

Certain aspects of the original productions of *Rent*, such as costume and staging, have become synonymous with the text. Although, unlike *Angels in America*, there are no strict guidelines for set, productions of *Rent* usually copy the approach taken by the original. This approach means that they mimic the minimalist, industrial looking set of the original Broadway production. Certain costume choices for characters also are seen across nearly all productions: Mark’s combination of glasses and a scarf, Mimi’s leopard print coat, Angel’s
‘Santa’ outfit. These costume choices, set by the original production and replicated by the London production, have become iconic costume pieces for Rent. These costume elements were, as with any new work, intrinsic in developing the characters of Rent. Many of the original costumes were sourced from East Village. The costumes were also developed with the original actors, reflecting their thoughts on the characters, and so helped to develop the character’s identities. The costumes, as well as the set, as outlined in Chapter 4, were also an intrinsic part of the identity of Rent and a link to its East Village roots. Although productions had, at times, through necessity, through the use of some slight artistic licence, changed elements of the original, there was never a deliberate moving away from the original identity as was seen in Baker’s version. In calling it Rent: Remixed Baker announces his intention to deviate from the original form. In so doing, as a closer textual reading will indicate, he alters the depiction of AIDS and also dilutes the original from its source. In addition, the substantial changes to the musical identity of Rent further detract from, and alter its dramatic form.

Baker’s production was, however, the first to be granted permission by the Larson Estate, to make extensive changes beyond features like costume and set. Previously it had been accepted that although changes within reasonable limits of artistic licence would be made. On the whole, and particularly with regard to music, Rent was expected to follow closely the original production. This was written into the terms of its licence. In Rent: Remixed, however, the depiction of the characters in terms of costume was altered drastically. While a change to some degree marks an evolution of the work, the costumes also root the characters in the time and place of the action. In the case of some characters, such as Angel and Mimi, costumes also form an integral part of their identity. In altering these, the central characters in Rent shift in identity.

Baker also as noted made significant alterations to the ethnicity of key characters, notably Joanne and Mimi. In the original, Joanne is African-American and Mimi is Hispanic; in Baker’s production, both were Caucasian, and Mimi specifically Irish. In the case of Mimi, it might be questioned whether the casting of ‘celebrity’ former pop star Siobhan Dogherty motivated this rather than any artistic element. Her retained accent also may have been more a practicality based on her acting abilities rather than a deliberate choice by Baker. In the case of Joanne however, an experienced theatre actress Francesca Jackson took the role, and although she used an American accent, the original was altered drastically by the change in her ethnicity.
The mix and dynamics of ethnicities were chosen by Larson and director Grief in an extensive casting process for the original production. The musical was then work shopped and re-written further with the specific ethnic identities of the performers in mind. In the New York production, the tours and the original London production, the ethnicities of the main characters have always followed the blueprint of the original cast. In changing this, without apparent artistic motivation, Baker radically alters and, it is argued, weakens the text. In Baker’s cast only three of the fifteen cast members are of non-Caucasian origins; Larson’s cast was designed to reflect the multi-ethnic East Village, and only three of the twenty in the cast were Caucasian.

It was - as quoted in the previous chapter on Rent, in the words of original cast member Jesse L Martin - ‘minority heaven’ in the original casting. As David Savran notes, the largely non-white cast of Rent was significant. In the original casting, although Rent was not explicitly ‘about’ race, the racial elements to the text play an important part in communicating with an audience. For example, as Savran notes, casting Benny, the ‘Yuppie Scum’ as African American, plays against expected stereotypes. If Baker had been updating to reflect the ethnic diversity in present day London, his cast should have been far more diverse. Larson, of course, did reflect the ethnic diversity of the city in which he set Rent. Baker’s changes to ethnicity of characters instead feel like a reduction rather than an addition.

The re-casting in the remix impacted on the depiction of characters with AIDS. Alongside this, the most puzzling and troublesome aspect of the re-design, which also effected on the deception of characters in Rent: Remixed, was the use of a projection of names of those who had died from AIDS related diseases including Rock Hudson, Freddie Mercury, Rudolph Nureyev. While being jarring to an audience, taking them out of the action, this was also anachronistic or at best troubling to the timeline of events in Rent. The inclusion of these figures takes Rent out of its time and place, confusing the depiction of AIDS for audiences. What this effect also does is to detract from the narrative of Rent. One of the greatest strengths of the text, as discussed previously, was the power and emotional resonance of narrative in Rent. The projection of real life characters’ names detracts from

825 Martin, Jesse L quoted in Larson, Rent with interviews and text by McDonnell and Silberger, p35.
826 Savran, David, Rent’s Due: Multiculturalism and the spectacle of Difference, Journal of American Drama and Theatre, 14, (Winter 2002)
827 This list was displayed on an LCD display across the top of the screen. The names, of which there is no complete record, were displayed on a rolling counter across certain points of the play. Several of the names died of AIDS or ‘came out’ as diagnosed after the 1995 setting of Rent making it anachronistic.
audience engagement with the characters on stage, and therefore from the depiction of AIDS. This effect was included; it appears, as a means of education, or with the intention of making the text more relevant to younger audiences. However, thanks to its anachronistic nature, it confuses depictions of AIDS for the audience.

The characters in the text themselves become altered by the catalogue of changes that Barker instigates. In so doing, the depiction of AIDS they are a conduit for is also altered. Although the characters can evolve with each production, as each director and actor develops their own interpretation of the characters, the essence of the narrative must remain. To take Mimi as an example, in changing her ethnicity, the style of dancing she does in the club is less meaningful as it appears less a part of Mimi’s character and story.

The fact is that in Baker’s revival, the characters lose some of their integrity. As Michael Billington says:

Larson wanted nothing like this. His original, dazzling idea was to recreate the world of Puccini’s La Boheme, with its impoverished young artists and heroine, dying of tuberculosis, in some Nineties Manhattan equivalent, where HIV rather than TB is what people feared most. Baker's Rent -resisting bohemians are not so much drop-outs as chic society people.828

Billington argues here that the alteration of characters in Baker’s version also alters the message and depiction of AIDS. This, given the changes Baker made, is a fair analysis. What Billington is alluding to here is the kind of ‘watered down’ or ‘muted’ feel that Rent: Remixed had.

The overt medical references in the text being minimal, Rent relies on a mixture of music and characterisation to communicate the effects of AIDS. The implications seen is almost purely emotional with only two real instances of physical impact being shown, as explored in chapter two, at Angel and Mimi’s death. If the audience is struggling to find an emotional connection to the characters, then the emotional effect of the characters’ battle with AIDS is lost.

5.3.5 Music in revival

As previously discussed, the depiction of AIDS seemed to be an aspect (despite highlighting it in his programme notes) that Baker was less concerned about in his direction. The re-orchestration mentioned, along with the staging all contributed to this. Rent originally, although without offering a concrete date in the original production, gave clear indicators through content, set and costumes of being set around the time of its conception, 1995.\textsuperscript{829} In the original production, and subsequent staging, the location of New York’s East Village was also clearly marked out aesthetically and through characterisation. The set, though minimal, was designed to reflect the type of building Mark and Roger would have lived in, a loft space in the East Village. The identity of New York is intrinsic to Rent and altering this aspect alters the musical drastically.

The most drastic change that Baker made to Rent and one which is largely unprecedented was the remixing of the musical score.\textsuperscript{830} It is examined here in parallel with the political facet of Angels as a subsection, because the musical element in Rent is as significant as the political element in Angels. The changes made to these in the revivals were therefore equally significant. It is rare for musicals to be completely re-orchestrated following their initial run, and more so for this to be done by someone other than the original composer.

Total re-orchestration of a musical is rare, but occasionally composers will revisit a score, or older works may be re-orchestrated for revival. Andrew Lloyd Webber re-orchestrated his Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat after its initial production and concept album. This practice is not uncommon in composers: Chess by Benny Anderson and Bjorn Ulveas\textsuperscript{832} has been repeatedly re-orchestrated by the composers in subsequent productions since the original performance in 1986 This is an attempt by the composers to remedy difficulties with the book and score, and it is still regarded as an ‘unfinished’ piece by the creative team, as stated by lyricist Tim Rice at the 2010 Royal Albert Hall concert version.\textsuperscript{833} Examples of re-orchestrations by those other than the original composer often happen to a minor degree in older musicals to update them musically or to accommodate

\textsuperscript{829} The setting of Rent was originally approximate to its original conception, 1995, this date was cemented in the film version and subsequently the exact date inserted into the stage production with Mark welcoming the audience with the line ‘Christmas Eve 1995’ (Larson, ‘Tune Up #1’ Rent, 1996.)

\textsuperscript{830} It is of note that no recording or written score of the amended Rent music is available. Reflection on the changes to music is derived from notes taken upon viewing the production and press reviews.

\textsuperscript{831} Lloyd, Webber, Andrew and Rice, Tim, Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat, 1968.

\textsuperscript{832} Anderson, Benny and Ulveas, Bjorn, Chess, 1986.

\textsuperscript{833} Rice, Tim, Chess in Concert, DVD, 2009.
artistic decisions. Lionel Bart’s Oliver!\textsuperscript{834} Was re-orchestrated to some degree in its 2009 revival: because there was an increased orchestra in order to fill the large space of the Theatre Royal Drury Lane, the orchestrations were altered to make the sound ‘bigger’ and fill the space. This kind of orchestral tweaking and alteration is not uncommon. Larger changes to established pieces where the original composer is absent are rarer: the Gershwin’s Crazy For You\textsuperscript{835} returned to the original songs and orchestrations in revival but this was using the composer’s original material. Drastic changes to the score without the composer, however, are rare.

The Larson estate granted permission for Baker to do so in 2006.\textsuperscript{836} Although previously they had not granted licence to make major changes to Jonathan Larson’s work, it is understandable that they gave it in this case, given the sound reasoning Baker presents. Baker proposed an updating to the score that was in keeping with contemporary music, in the same way Larson’s was when he wrote it. However, as with the direction and design, the drastic change to the music was not successful. Baker’s re-orchestrations, carried out with sound designer Steve Anderson, drastically altered key songs from the musical, including central characters’ songs such as Roger’s ‘One Song Glory’ and Mimi’s ‘Out Tonight’.

The song ‘One Song Glory’ was slowed and softened, losing the more authentic rock feel that was grown organically out of the original Roger, Adam Pascal’s, rock background.\textsuperscript{837} In Baker’s version, the tempo and style gave ‘One Song Glory’ a ballad feel that is incongruous with the music as written and the style in which it was originally intended. The song itself is an angry cry against the injustice of Roger’s condition. This is articulated when he sings: ‘Time flies, And then no need to endure anymore, Time dies.’\textsuperscript{838} Roger is a struggling musician; we’re told he has had gigs at New York club CBGB’s\textsuperscript{839} which indicates to an audience the kind of musician he is. Baker’s altering of the musical style of Roger’s key song confuses depictions of the character. This is a level of change that actually alters audience perception of a character, and brings into question the artistic integrity and relation with the original version that Baker is trying to create. Roger changes from a particular kind of rock musician into someone else with the change to his music. For the kind of musician,

\textsuperscript{834} Bart, Lionel, Oliver! 1968.
\textsuperscript{835} Gershwin, George and Gershwin, Ira, with Ludwig, Ken, Crazy For You, 1992.
\textsuperscript{836} Baker, Rent programme, 2006.
\textsuperscript{837} Adam Pascal was not a theatre actor when found for the show but singing in a rock band. He continues to write and perform his own music alongside various acting roles.
\textsuperscript{838} Larson, ‘One Song Glory,’ Rent, 1996.
\textsuperscript{839} A famous rock club in New York’s West Village, CBGB’S founded in 1973 became synonymous with punk. The club closed in 2006.
and therefore the kind of person he is, Roger’s style of music as much as the words he sings are important. These changes alter dramatically the meaning or effect of the music, which becomes problematic.

The changes to music do not only affect this one character. In the case of Mimi also, ‘Out Tonight’ changed from the high tempo declaration of life in defiance of illness to a more sombre number that once again alters an audience’s interpretation of Mimi’s character. The song alters Mimi from the ‘S&M dancer’ she was originally described as; and the hard rock tempo of the original orchestration is also changed. Marlowe describes it as ‘the slimy burlesque number that replaces Larson’s original shouty song of seduction, Out Tonight’, while the review in The Independent was less kind, describing: ‘Siobhan Donaghy's strangely sung Mimi (a smack head dancer at the Cat Scratch Club - think Miss Adelaide with a syringe and no sense of humour)’. Although this is a critique on the performance, both comments also illustrate the implications of changing the musical approach to Mimi, particularly her key song.

In Baker’s version the song becomes ‘Burlesque’ and her job/identity alter with it. The change is significant. S&M dancing indicates a certain identity: it is edgy, away from mainstream culture, deviant and associated with sexual encounters still considered taboo. Burlesque dancing and culture had by 2006, through prominent figures like Dita Von Tesse, become seen as acceptable, almost mainstream. Mimi’s song Out Tonight is formative in indicating her employment. In the original she is a stripper in what is clearly meant to be an underground, deviant setting - one that would be not, as Larson’s later lyrics suggest, ‘in the mainstream’. In Baker’s version, the more socially acceptable version of stripping her music and style now suggests dramatically alters the character. In altering how

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842 Dita Von Tesse is a model and Burlesque performer widely credited with re-popularising the art form. After modelling for Playboy in 2002 her act gained much attention in the popular press. She is now the best known, and well paid, burlesque performers in the world.
843 Burlesque or neo-Burlesque as it has become known, underwent a revival of its own in the 1990s, initially in America but quickly spreading to Europe and Britain. Heralded by performers such as Dita Von Tesse burlesque performers as well as amateurs have enjoyed resurgence in popularity. Merging traits from a variety of Burlesque traditions they focus on elaborate costumes and the ‘sensual’ over the overtly sexual. There is currently a worldwide contest for Burlesque performers in ‘Miss Exotic World’ and a museum dedicated to the art of Burlesque the ‘Burlesque Hall of fame’. These elements and the popularity of the art form, with its emphasis on sexual empowerment have made Burlesque popular and acceptable within society.
844 In La Vie Boheme the characters sing ‘Anyone out of the mainstream, Is anyone in the mainstream?’ Larson, La Vie Boheme, Rent, 1996.
Mimi presents her sexuality, and her attitude to AIDS in her song, her character is altered. She is softened, and appears weaker. In Larson’s original, the loud, aggressive music of Mimi’s anthem demonstrated her personality and her attitude to AIDS. She was attacking life, and her AIDS diagnosis, and in her subversive use of sexuality, being subversive in relation to the dominant culture. In Baker’s version, all of this - and Mimi’s personality - is muted. The songs in a musical are integral in creating character. In drastically altering both of these musical numbers the original characterisation and identity are lost.

Rent’s relationship to La Boheme is a question posed since the musical’s inception, and is important in considering the musical changes. Peter Royston created Rent - A Study Guide, and in it he asks questions of Larson’s integration of Puccini’s score. Royston quotes Larson as saying ‘I analysed the libretto, broke it down beat by beat.’ It is clear on analysis of the libretto that Larson took more than just his story from Boheme. Ian Nisbet’s Transposition in Jonathan Larson’s Rent explores this in detail, reading Puccini and Larson’s scores side by side at key moments in the story. This continuity with Boheme is significant in considering Rent: Remixed, because in the original there was a certain continuity running through that marked out the pieces as part of the same body of music. Nisbet explores how Larson draws on the musical facets of Puccini’s score, transposing it to his own, modern score. Larson used Puccini’s score, making his an adaptation directly related to the source material. In Baker’s changes to the score, Rent becomes further removed from the source material. Because Larson took influence directly from Boheme, the adherence to his adaptation or transposing of Puccini’s music is an integral part of Rent. Altering this changes Larson’s intent with the music and so alters Rent considerably.

The music of Rent is integral to its narrative and its depictions of AIDS. The musical, as mentioned, is sung-through, all the distinct songs linked by short pieces of dialogue also set to music. The overall similarities in style of the original orchestrations means a continuous flow to the piece that is absent in Baker’s version. The marked stylistic differences in each major musical number result in a discordant feel to the piece, while the

845 Published by the New York Theatre Workshop where Rent was staged in 1996.
849 Nisbet focuses in on musical themes of La Boheme and relates them to Larson’s score. These include the ‘love’ theme of Rodolfo and Mimi and Musetta’s Waltz.
alterations to character’s key musical numbers drastically alter an audience member’s interpretation of the characters and the piece.

5.3.6 Press response

In considering the significance of Rent: Remixed it is pertinent to consider the ongoing perception of Rent’s initial failure in London. It has been argued here that this was not an accurate evaluation of Rent in London; however critical opinion in 2006 maintained this stance. There was much made of the perceived lack of success as compared to the original London production as a preordained indicator of the failure of Rent: Remixed, with references peppered across many of the reviews to this allegedly failed production. Some critics use this as a focal point of their reviews. Ian Shuttleworth comments that while the New York production had been ‘a Broadway fixture’, the show was ‘unable to duplicate its success in the West End’.850 If taken literally, this is a fair analysis: Rent in London or anywhere else could not hope to duplicate the success of the Broadway run. Rent on Broadway ran for 12 years and over 5,000 performances, a run the original London performance clearly could not match. There are many complex and varied reasons for this, many of which, including, economics, marketing and competition are outside the scope of this study. What is clear is that Rent captured and held the imagination of the New York theatre audiences, a fact that it is difficult to analyse or quantify given the lack of data recorded in this area. However, in London, the original production earned a respectable, but substantially shorter 18 month run. Sam Marlowe notes this in his review of Rent: Remixed, ‘In London it was a different story. Rent hit the West End in 1998 and flopped, with British audiences and critics failing to respond to its blend of bombast and sentiment.’851 In comparison with the critical response to Angels, which heaped praise upon the original while being wary of a revival, the critics had been wary of Rent from the days of the original production. In reviewing the ‘remixed’ version, the dislike critics had shown of the original production, coupled with the almost universally agreed ‘failure’ they concluded it had been, did little to support Rent’s critical reception in Britain.

Nevertheless, there were those who, perhaps due to a dislike of the original, did support Baker’s re-working. Marlowe felt that if anyone could in his words ‘give Larson’s

musical a hip replacement’ that it was Baker. This indicates that, that he felt the play still had hope of redemption given the right production. Such comments also indicate a support for such reworking in general. It is true that a major overhaul of staging and even arrangement is not unheard of in musical revivals, and could be seen as a means to improve on a flawed original. For some critics, despite the derision of others, this was the case for Rent: Remixed and the changes outlined were seen as improvements rather than detractions. Marlowe is one of the minority who felt the ‘makeover’ is an improvement, going as far as to say: ‘I suspect Larson wouldn’t have been displeased with the makeover’. And ‘a flawed production stylishly repackaged.’ Marlowe here is reflecting an element of Baker’s motivation for ‘remixing’ Rent. As outlined in the introduction to this section, reworking including the re-orchestration of musical theatre pieces is fairly common with or without the input of the composer. It is neither unheard of nor necessarily a bad thing. However, for the audience, particularly those familiar with the original, the re-orchestration is problematic. With established musicals like Rent with an available cast recording, the likelihood of audience members having heard the original arrangements is increased. This creates a pre-emptive impression of both the music, and by association, the characters. Changing this expectation, or challenging it, can be a good thing or an interesting artistic choice, but in this case, for the reasons explored, it was not. For audiences expecting something similar to the original, this would have been a frustrating experience. In diverting from the original sound so dramatically, Rent: Remixed lost the musical identity that was influenced by the time and place Larson set it.

The musical format is reliant on a symbiosis of music, book and production in order to work. Successful musicals are those in which all aspects - book, lyrics, orchestration, design - work together. By changing the production so drastically, Baker’s production suffered. As Billington comments:

The characters in Baker's updated version now inhabit a white-walled, Perspex-screened world that shrieks Manhattan chic: if this is raffish bohemian poverty, I would not mind some of it.  

853 Ibid.  
854 Ibid.  
856 Ibid.
For Billington, the integrity of the setting, although always a theatrical construct, was vital in eliciting empathy with these characters. He felt that the drastic changes to staging detracted from this. He mentions the stark white, modern staging feeling that it was not fitting with the ideas of bohemia that Larson was attempting to create. For Billington, the grubby, rough staging of the original was as integral to the creation of Larson’s world as the characters themselves. These changes, as he noted, became a reduction rather than remix of Rent. He was not alone in this. The setting, in Paul Taylor’s view, too, removes the essential ‘grunge’ of the original, and drastically changes the piece. The centre of critical problems with the production lie with a stylistic approach that detracts from the intended relation to reality that Michael Grief’s original production evoked. This attempt at updating appears at its core misguided, as Rent was in its staging originally about encapsulating a specific time and place. Critics showed that they felt this in their responses. One review summarised Rent, saying: ‘You could say Rent is a Nineties musical for the Generation X-ers.’\textsuperscript{857} This comment is indicating that the show appealed to a particular demographic, and in altering the original – indeed, in seeming to alter the time it was set in as Baker did - this appeal was lost even to the demographic to whom it should have most appealed.

Many musicals and plays speak to a particular time and place or demographic but retain an appeal and significance beyond this. Hair, to which Rent is so often compared, while being a ‘voice’ and ‘depiction’ of that generation which it represents, has endurance and appeal beyond that. It is significant, as noted earlier, that Larson himself was re-writing or perhaps ‘remixing’ an existing text, one that itself was of a specific time and place. This illustrates the key issue with Baker’s updating; it was not the updating but the execution of the update that was the issue. As David Benedict in his review points out, Larson’s updating of La Boheme highlights that it is not just a rewrite but encompasses the world he knew, including poverty, disease and art\textsuperscript{858}. In doing so therefore, Larson grounded his new version of Boheme not as a vacuous update but one that grounded itself in the artistic sensibilities and concerns of the new era. Benedict is supported by both Cline’s work on Larson for New York Theatre workshop, cited earlier in this chapter, and the analysis conducted by Nisbet, also cited. Both these analyses note how Larson worked closely with Puccini’s text, and the original Murger novel. In his remixed version, therefore, Baker seems too many steps from the original to retain the sense of connection to the source that Larson manages.

\textsuperscript{857} Butler, Robert, Bohemian Travesty, Independent on Sunday, 17th May 1998.
\textsuperscript{858} Benedict, David, The American musical comes of age, The Independent on Sunday, London, 19\textsuperscript{th} April, 1998.
However, the negativity in reviews was not only directed at the new ‘version’ of *Rent* but also at the content, a criticism retained from the original version. Critics, although in some cases they had been quick to find fault with the original, were in this remixed version also finding the opportunity to give a more considered reflection on the original production as well. This is related to the mode of adaptation. Hutcheon says: ‘If an adaptation is perceived as “lowering” a story (according to some imagined hierarchy of medium or genre) response is likely to be negative’. Hutcheon was talking about film adaptations that were viewed to ‘lower’ so-called ‘higher’ art forms. But this argument applies to the response *Rent: Remixed* experienced. The revival was viewed as ‘lowering’ the original from what was considered an innovative musical, to something that was of a lower quality, and was a lower art-form. In terms of *Rent*, this has a doubled effect because *Rent* had originally been adapted from *La La Boheme*, meaning that accusations of ‘lowering’ already existed. In adapting the text further, and in making what were ultimately unsuccessful changes, the accusation of ‘lowering’ through poor artistic work is strengthened.

The conclusions drawn on *Rent: Remixed* by critics like deJongh and Billington, who liked and respected the approach of Larson’s original, are that it is worryingly anachronistic and confusing. It would be particularly so to an audience not familiar with the original. As Billington also said, ‘it is all as misguided as a recent attempt to yank *Hair* out of its 1960s world and treat it as a modern protest musical’ In the eyes of the critics, the updating of *Rent* that Baker envisaged would clarify communication of its message to a new audience had the opposite effect. Summed up effectively:

> Larson wanted nothing like this. His original, dazzling idea was to recreate the world of Puccini’s *La Boheme*...Baker's *Rent* -resisting bohemians are not so much drop-outs as chic society people.

Drawing on the links to Puccini’s opera, deJongh here points out the slightly vacuous or hypocritical feeling that the direction or ‘remixing’ of *Rent* left critics and audiences with. These specific faults found with *Rent: Remixed* builds to an overall sense of both disappointment and a feeling that such revisions were unnecessary. DeJongh finds the alterations ‘disappointing’, but the biggest issue with ‘Remixed’ he highlights is an uncertainty over when it takes place. He says: ‘the piece is still in the 1990s but the set and

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references seem to suggest present day.\footnote{Ibid.} For audiences to connect with \textit{Rent}, particularly audiences in Britain which were already culturally separated from the world depicted, there needed a sense of cultural consistency in the piece that Baker’s remixing removes.

As mentioned earlier, Michael Billington sums up his review saying: ‘They call this ‘Rent Remixed’ I’d dub it ‘Rent reduced.’\footnote{Billington, M, Synthetic makeover robs Rent of its roots: Rent Duke of York’s theatre, The Guardian, London, England, 16th October 2007.} There is a clear feeling, then, by Billington that the changes detracted from rather than supported the British audience in 2007 in gaining anything from \textit{Rent: Remixed}. He goes on to note that: ‘The plot and numbers have been retained, but everything else has been senselessly jettisoned.’\footnote{Ibid.} For some critics, as shown, the content and style of \textit{Rent} will never be appealing regardless of its packaging. The perceived loss of integrity by ‘remixing’ or removing \textit{Rent} from the source material became a further reductive element rather than a supportive one for most of the British critical press, however.

5.3.7 Reviving \textit{Rent} in 2007

It is argued here that the changes Baker made to \textit{Rent} made the piece lose clarity. Overall the plot became muddled, and thus so did the depiction of AIDS. It is logical that directors desire change that they wish in reviving a text to put their own mark upon it; and Baker seems to have had sound motivation aside from artistic vanity. Baker’s approach, however, is misguided as in the alterations it loses much of the musical, emotional and artistic integrity of the existing text.

The text lost much of its identity, and as a result alienated existing fans and gained few new ones. For the existing fans, the changes to the musical they loved were too great to reconcile. Musical theatre fans often indulge in repeat viewings, and therefore the need to replicate some element of the original is often quite strong. Carlson uses the original \textit{Rent} as an example of a show where, on a re-visit, ‘[E]verything - costumes, scenery, lighting, even basic blocking and gestures has remained essentially the same but with a totally new set of bodies in place’\footnote{Carlson, Marvin, \textit{The Haunted Stage: The Theatre as a Memory Machine}, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003, p98.}. This is not a phenomena unique to \textit{Rent}; more a symptom of contemporary musical theatre production. However, in terms of reviving \textit{Rent} the element of
‘ghosting’ was particularly strong. Fans, through the recorded versions of Rent and their own personal experience, had very particular expectations of Rent. They were expecting the kind of revival that Brantley’s review critiqued. For fans of Rent, and indeed of any major musical, recapturing the original production is often a significant element of the experience. Productions may slightly alter elements of the production; they may even re-stage and re-design it, but if it loses the essence of what that musical originally was, fans lose interest.

This element - the lack of theatrical ghosting - explains why fans of Rent, perhaps even including the most casual of fans, were left disenchanted and disillusioned by the revival. The motivation behind the re-invention of Rent by Baker and his team was a sound one. To further adapt Rent for new audiences and to bring a new artistic take to the material is the basis for all theatrical revival. However, the adaptation must also work alongside the original. As Hutcheon says of adaptation, ‘It is repetition but without replication, bringing together the comfort of ritual and recognition with the delight of surprise and novelty.’

Rent: Remixed failed to retain that which was ‘comforting’ about the original, and also failed to replace this with anything of ‘novelty’ to audiences. Overall, the effect of Rent appears diminished by Baker’s changes. As Carlson puts it ‘One of the most important effects of drama’s recycling of material is that it encourages audiences to compare varying versions of the same story.’

What Baker’s production managed was to make audiences wish for a return to the original version. For Rent to be effective, as a theatrical work and as a depiction of AIDS, it needs to emotionally connect with an audience. The original production transposed effectively to Britain because this emotional connection overrode any cultural dissonance in relation to AIDS. As illustrated, the changes Baker made alienated audiences and severed the emotional connection of Rent.

The effect of Rent was also diminished by Baker’s production in the changes to the music and style of the piece. The importance of Rent stems as much from its theatrical style as its content or depiction of AIDS. While not unique as a rock musical, or as a musical that used contemporary musical influences, Rent was markedly different to the offerings of the London theatrical landscape. The musical and stylistic changes Baker made to the text were anachronistic, discordant and ultimately alienating to audiences. The effect they had was to take an innovative musical theatre text and change the music and the content beyond

recognition. The Rent Baker presented in 2007 was too far removed from the original, and its effectiveness in depicting AIDS on the British stage was severely diminished.

5.4 Reviving Angels and Rent in 2007

The staging of both revivals in 2007 indicated that there was a cultural and theatrical interest in texts dealing with AIDS at that time. That Angels was well received indicates that the right text, in the right staging, could still garner critical as well as public interest. It can also be argued that the level of critical disdain, even anger towards Rent: Remixed indicates that critics and audiences felt the importance of the subject matter in these texts. Both Angels and Rent in revival in 2007 were not in isolation in dealing with AIDS on stage in the same period.

Though successful in both production and critical reception, Angels lacked a mass popular appeal to make it feasible to stage in a large commercial West End venue to mirror that of its Broadway run. Angels, while a critical and perhaps academic success, cannot necessarily be determined a popular success in Britain. Although there was indeed appeal to audiences, including some who would consider themselves ‘fans’ of the show and who would be likely to see multiple productions or even repeat viewings of a run, these are not enough in number or in dedication to sustain the play alone. In contrast, Rent has both a dedicated fan base and a broader popular appeal that has sustained, even bolstered, its popularity in the ensuing years. In considering the revivals, therefore, Angels revived at the Lyric was a strong theatrical experiment. That the press responded positively and that Headlong successfully toured and staged the play in London indicates that a theatrical audience for this - and by default plays dealing with AIDS - still existed in London in 2007.

In the case of Angels, it has arguably become outdated and/or more difficult to relate to so long after the original production. There is also such a high regard for the Donnellan/Oremond original production, which in fact contributed to much of its success in Britain, that a deviation from this left those who saw the original production feeling it was somehow lesser. In terms of the play itself, Angels in America now functions more as a historical piece that may be used as a reflection of a period and taken forward to the present day. In its original inception Angels retained a sense of urgency. The events depicted, while not as prescient in Britain were still a major concern in the US; and something that the socially conscious in the audience felt was necessary to be talked about. In its revival, it
becomes instead a lesson from the past: a no less relevant and useful function as a performance text but an illustration of how meaning of it has shifted over time.

There is clear evidence that the remixing of Rent which Baker attempted in 2007 did not prove successful. In terms of critical response, in part this is a remnant of the original resistance to Rent – but it is more a reaction to changes that simply did not work. Baker’s changes actually had an adverse effect on the telling of the story and the depiction of AIDS in Rent. The British experience of AIDS - certainly that of Rent’s target audience’s experience of AIDS - had been profoundly different to that in the generation and country Larson was part of and writing about. The teenagers and twenty-somethings that saw Rent for the first time in Britain had already moved on from what the characters in the play experienced, but nevertheless in the original form they took it to heart. The fact that ‘remixing’ the play failed illustrates that there is something inherently powerful in Larson’s writing that connected audiences to his depictions of AIDS despite a disparate experience.

The revivals of both Angels in America and Rent were not as successful as their original productions. This does not exclude the significance of both texts both in the depiction of AIDS and in the wider theatrical landscape. Neither does it detract from the importance of, and effect of, the originals. As Hutcheson says, ‘An adaptation is not vampiric: it does not draw the life-blood from its source and leave it dying or dead, nor is it paler than the adapted work.’⁸⁶⁸ Both Angels in America and Rent will retain their significance as the first major productions in Britain to address AIDS on stage.

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Chapter 6 *Angels* and *Rent* transposed to the British stage

This study has considered and demonstrated how *Angels in America* and *Rent* were transposed to the British stage. These texts were chosen as key examples of AIDS plays and as examples of American drama transposed to Britain. Their staging also represented two very separate elements of the British theatrical landscape: *Angels* at the National representing the subsidised sector, while *Rent* was staged at the commercial West End. These two productions represented the higher-profile end of AIDS work in Britain, by virtue of the venues in which they were staged and the press attention they received. This chapter will summarise the conclusions of the study. Using the research questions, as set out in Chapter 1, the conclusions relating to the depiction of AIDS and the transposition to the British stage will be considered. In addition, the reception and significance of these plays is discussed. Finally, a reflection on the study and proposals for future areas of study are set out.

The research questions, set out in the introduction, were:

- How well did these American plays about AIDS transpose to the London stage and how did they depict AIDS in performance?
- What response did these plays receive in London, in their original production and in revival?
- What is the significance of these plays in relation to the depiction of AIDS in theatre and the theatrical landscape in London?

The analysis of both texts in Chapters 3 and 4 concluded that both of them successfully depicted AIDS in a way that was accessible and engaging to British audiences. Through considering the characters with AIDS, the physical depiction of AIDS, the language associated with AIDS and the emotional impact of AIDS, it was demonstrated that both *Angels* and *Rent* effectively represented AIDS and transferred to a new cultural context successfully.
6.1 Depictions of AIDS in Angels and Rent

The analysis of Angels in Chapter 3 concluded that it successfully balanced the political facets of confronting AIDS with wider political issues. Angels marked a successful continuation of AIDS plays; in particular The Normal Heart which, while being distinctly American in its concerns and depictions, likewise had significance for the theatrical landscape. In being staged at the National, however, Angels achieved a level of attention not seen for previous texts on AIDS. The timing of the production was also important. Unlike The Normal Heart, which took place at the very start of the AIDS pandemic, Angels was staged in 1993 in Britain, when the country was truly feeling the effect of AIDS. Theatre, as it had also done in New York, was providing an answer and outlet for this. Kushner’s text was accomplished in style as well as content, which led to the critical success and academic analysis which followed.

The depictions of AIDS in Angels were medically detailed while still having emotional and political resonance. This made the portrayal of AIDS in Angels both powerful and easy to transpose to the British stage, despite some differences in context. The medical depictions, while tied to American knowledge and experience of the period in which it was set, were also accessible and understandable. Examples of this include Roy’s doctor explaining the medical facts, such as: ‘The antibodies are powerless to protect the body against it’\textsuperscript{869} and Prior describing his current condition in more colloquial terms: ‘[T]wo new lesions. My leg hurts. There’s protein in my urine.’\textsuperscript{870} Detailed but comprehensible, these medical references transcend the individual experience of Britain and America and allow audiences to understand the impact on the characters’ health.

The emotional and political questions attached to AIDS are understood despite the American setting. Firstly, the ramifications for the gay community AIDS had shown through the emotional involvement of the characters with each other: the deterioration of Prior’s and Louis’s relationship and the care of Prior’s friend Belize. As Kushner states, ‘The question I am trying to ask is how broad a community’s reach is? How wide does it reach?’\textsuperscript{871} This statement indicates that the aim was to consider community in the wider sense, not only the New York community that Angels depicts; and in exploring themes of relationships and friendships, Kushner achieved this.

\textsuperscript{869} Kushner, Millennium, Act 1, Scene 9, 1993, p 48.
\textsuperscript{870} Kushner, Millennium, Act 1, Scene 7, 1993, p 45.
\textsuperscript{871} Fisher, James (ed) The Theater of Tony Kushner Living Past Hope, Chapter Three., Troubling the Waters, Routledge, New York, 2002, p11
Certain aspects of the political facets of *Angels* were more problematic in their transposition to the British stage. For example the use of Roy Cohn, as explored in some detail, is potentially problematic with British audiences perhaps being unfamiliar with this real life figure. However, Cohn remains an important figure in Kushner’s work. As Kushner says: ‘AIDS is what finally outed Roy Cohn’.\(^\text{872}\) He is an important character as his presence in the text helps to illustrate both a range of people with AIDS, and a range of cultural and political perceptions of the illness.

Leaving Roy to one side, some of the other political commentary of Kushner’s work – that which was embedded firmly in American Reaganite politics – was potentially alienating to British theatre audiences. As Fisher comments, ‘the AIDS epidemic had, in essence, pushed gay dramatists towards a more politicized view whether they liked it or not.’\(^\text{873}\)  ‘This is indicative of Kushner’s politics in the broader sense: while the Republican, Reaganite politics were a central focus for *Angels*, Kushner is actually concerned with a broader political spectrum, as found in Louis’ political diatribe: ‘That’s just liberalism, the worst kind of liberalism, really bourgeois tolerance, and I think what AIDS shows us is the limits of tolerance.’\(^\text{874}\)  This speech demonstrates Kushner’s assessment of the politics of humanity, both in relation to AIDS and in the broadest sense of the term. The use of the Angels cements this broader political outlook. For instance, in fighting the Angels, Prior becomes politically engaged and so contributes to progress. The use of the Angels addresses complex questions of political philosophy, but they are questions that are inspired by the politics of AIDS and a wider political outlook, and therefore they transcend the political borders of America and Britain.

The depictions of AIDS in *Rent*, it has been argued, were actually easier to transpose to a British stage, being less detailed in their specific medical depictions and more reliant on emotional resonance. In terms of medical detail *Rent* is certainly less informative as an educative piece on its own than *Angels*. It does, however, provide an emotional connection that transcends the factors of nationality and location. Although *Rent* had, as was Larson’s intention, an identity tied to its time and place, the audience is provided with an overview of the effect of AIDS on a community, leaving it without the medical specifics that tie such other depictions firmly to a particular time and locale. The audience is engaged through the love

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\(^{872}\) Cadden, Michael Strange *Angel the pink listing of Roy Cohn* Geis/Kruger, 1997, p 83


stories of the two central couples, and the through the friendship of Mark and Roger. So, for example, Collins and Angel say:

Angel: My body provides a comfortable home, for the Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome

Collins: As does mine

Angel: We’ll get along fine.875

In this, Rent appeals to the emotional element related to AIDS rather than the medical. This can be seen also in the platonic relationship between Mark and Roger:

Roger: You pretend to create and observe, when really you detach from being alive

Mark: Maybe it’s because I’m the one of us to survive.876

Again, the engagement an audience feels with the topic of AIDS is encouraged through the emotional impact on the characters rather than medical depiction. Rent uses examples of friendship, in particular Mark and Roger’s relationship, to indicate that AIDS not only had an impact on romantic or sexual relationships, but on friendships as well.

This depiction of AIDS in both Angels and Rent was successful. It was concluded that both effectively depicted AIDS and remained effective and accessible when transposed to the British stage. Angels, it is concluded, contained the more graphic and more medically oriented depictions of AIDS. Scenes in which characters explain their illness in explicit medical detail occur across the plays. There are also several examples of performing the effects of the illness by the characters with AIDS. Angels therefore effectively depicted AIDS in its physical sense, while also retaining emotional connection to the characters. In Rent the emphasis was more on the emotional impact of AIDS. However, this did not diminish its effectiveness as a depiction of AIDS on stage. In Rent there is some depiction of the physical elements of AIDS: characters are seen to suffer its effects and the death of central characters serves to illustrate the severity of the illness. In Rent, it is the emotional facets of AIDS that are given prominence. Although taking different approaches to the depiction of AIDS and its effect on the characters, each play is shown to depict AIDS effectively. In each AIDS is depicted politically, either directly relating to American politics, as in the case of Angels, or in the sense of a world view politics as in Rent. Although different in the approach to depicting the political implications of AIDS both Angels and Rent were determined to be effective.

875 Larson, ‘You Ok honey?’ Act 1, Rent, 1996.
depictions which transposed well to the London stage despite the political differences between Britain and America.

6.2 Responses to *Angels* and *Rent*

The audience’s response to either play could not be gauged due to the retrospective nature of this study and the lack of quantitative and qualitative data from the time of their production, as outlined in Chapter 1. As no direct evidence is available from audiences at the time, a fair representation of their reception and interpretation cannot be made. Likewise, having not witnessed the original London productions first hand, again as noted in Chapter 1, my own ethnographic response to them in that context cannot be considered. In addition, audience responses are difficult to collect and would be highly diverse. Any kind of research into audiences will, as Susan Bennett states, struggle to find cohesive response. An audience’s response as a whole cannot be fully gauged as each person’s view will be different. While an approximate assessment of how British audiences responded to these plays can be made, no definitive conclusions can be drawn given the multitude of people who saw the performances every night. Instead, press responses to the plays were used to gauge the professional judgement of the plays, to assess the reception they received in their London productions.

For *Angels*, there was some trepidation from reviewers about the length and scale of the piece. For example, Nightingale comments that: ‘Part 2 does not add enough to Part 1 to justify its three and a half hour length’ , indicating a concern for the necessity of such a lengthy work, particularly when coupled with the subject matter, Nightingale continues: ‘A three and a half hour play about AIDS is not the most inviting of prospects.’ However, four critics did respond favourably. Michael Billington saw the political facet of Kushner’s drama in relation to AIDS as a significant factor, saying: ‘Kushner has written a work on the imperative for change.’ By this, he is illustrating the importance of *Angels* as AIDS drama. Billington also situates his review in the context of American drama as a whole, saying: ‘Sprawling and over-written as it may be, it is a play of epic energy that gets American drama not just out of the closet but thank God out of the living room as well.’ Here, Billington’s review shows

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877 Ibid.  
879 Ibid.  
880 Ibid.
awareness by critics that *Angels* held significance not just as an AIDS text but as an example of innovative American drama being staged in Britain.

For *Rent*, press response was characterised by caution at the British reception, in contrast to the play’s rapturous acceptance in America. This is illustrated by the following comment from *The Times*: ‘New York went crazy for the tale of doomed love, Aids and drug addiction that is *Rent*. But will the hit Broadway musical have cynical British theatregoers queuing round the block for a ticket?’

There was, among critics, a view that the appeal of *Rent* would not extend to Britain. However, amid this trepidation there was praise for its content. Michael Billington, making a point about the surrounding publicity, said: ‘Once you strip away the hype and hysteria you find a genuinely enjoyable anthem to modern youth: a touch sentimental and self-admiring but full of melodic invention.’ This shows that there was recognition of *Rent’s* content as well as its context.

The very different natures of the texts affected both their depiction of AIDS and the press reception. Those critics who are not fond of musicals, or indeed ‘modern’ innovation in theatre, are unlikely to warm to *Rent*. Similarly, those with an aversion to overt politics in plays were not as impressed by *Angels*. Therefore, considering these critical responses alongside one another, gives a strong picture of the response to these plays. Overall the response to both plays was found to be positive. It can be concluded therefore that the reception and the transposition to London in this respect, was favourable.

6.3 Revivals

The depiction of AIDS and the critical reception of these plays were explored further in the analysis of *Angels* and *Rent* in revival. Both re-staged in 2007, these revivals allowed both for reflection on depictions of AIDS in the re-staged texts, as well as an opportunity to look back and consider the critical reception following the original production. In conducting an analysis of the revived versions of the plays, it is possible to reflect on the longer-term significance of performing these texts for British theatre. The revival of both these texts implies that they were considered successful, which supports the analysis in Chapters 1 and 2. In reviving the texts, there is also an assumption that those responsible for the re-staging considered the content and artistic approach to have continued relevance to the audience in question – in this case London audiences in 2007.

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The revival of *Angels* was unlikely to have the same significance in terms of prestige and wider theatrical and cultural significance as in its staging at the National Theatre. Only a revival there, or a large scale commercial revival equivalent to the Broadway production, could allow for the same level of theatrical significance. Interestingly, in the 2010 New York revival of *Angels* – its first full revival in New York – the theatre chosen was of similar size and type to that in which the play was revived in Britain in 2007. This is indicative of a shift in *Angels*’ place in the theatrical landscape. It remained important, worthy of revival and attention; however, it is not a commercial play, being difficult in staging and in subject matter, and therefore had more problems attracting audiences. *Rent*, however, was revived on the same scale as its original, showing in a West End theatre, which indicates a continued faith in its commercial value. However, it is important to note that the backing of *Rent: Remixed* was probably equally associated with its famous director as the commodity of the play itself.

*Angels* received a good reception in revival overall. Under the direction of Daniel Kramer, who made changes to the text to update it slightly, it was successfully revived at the Lyric Hammersmith for a limited run. The design was altered for the new space, some scenes were directed very differently to the original, and obviously the actors’ interpretations in this version were different to the original. Substantial change was also made to the ending, with the permission of Tony Kushner, which made the end message of progress less anachronistic. In general, however, the changes were minor, and supported the original essence of Kushner’s work. The press reception for *Angels* in revival was mainly positive. Billington, who had praised the original production, said: ‘Daniel Kramer's revival had delivered plenty that was impressive: daring staging, vigorous dialogue and terrific acting.’ This comment wedded the enduring appeal of the play with praise for Kramer’s directing. Other critics recognised its importance as a play. ‘It is hard to overstate the impact of Tony Kushner’s AIDS drama when it appeared in two instalments in 1992 and 1993’ said Simon Edge, indicating that in revival the significance of the original was not being lost.

It was, for *Rent: Remixed*, a different story in the press. The revival was largely rejected by critics, and this study has found that the alterations made to the text negatively altered the successful portrayal of characters with AIDS for reception in a British setting. For example, the re-orchestration of Roger’s iconic musical number ‘One Song Glory’ drastically

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883 William Baker is the concert director for pop singer Kylie Minogue
changed the characterisation and mood of the scene. Likewise, altering Mimi’s ‘Out Tonight’ shifted elements of her character and the narrative of the piece. In musical theatre, the music is a vital tool for narrative and characterisation. By drastically altering this, Baker altered the basic make-up of Rent. In addition, casting choices which changed the ethnicity of characters, and design choices that left audiences uncertain as to the setting of Rent, made the piece become muddled; and the story, and subsequently the depiction of AIDS within it, was lost. Press response echoed this. The milder end of the spectrum stated: ‘I suspect Larson wouldn’t have been displeased with the makeover,’ while more virulent responses included: ‘They call this ‘Rent Remixed’ I’d dub it ‘Rent reduced.’ An overall distaste for the revival from the press, and substantial changes to Rent for the ‘remixed’ version, meant the re-staging in 2007 was not as successful as the Angels revival in continuing to depict AIDS on the British stage.

6.4 The Significance of AIDS plays in London

It has been illustrated that these plays were successfully transposed to the London stage. Each play has been shown to successfully depict AIDS in a manner that would allow London audiences, as well as their American audiences, to understand and empathise with their content. Both plays were well-received in their original London productions. The reception of the revivals was, as illustrated, more varied, but to a degree Angels in particular continued to be well received when revived. In considering the significance of each of these texts, both in their original transposed production and revival, their place in the theatrical landscape and wider influences will be reflected upon.

6.4.1 Theatrical landscape

The fact that the press responded positively to Angels in revival and that Headlong Theatre Company successfully toured and staged the play in London in 2007 indicates that a theatrical audience for this text and, by default, other plays dealing with AIDS continue in 2014 in London. The staging of both revivals in 2007 indicated that there was a continued theatrical interest in texts dealing with AIDS. It is reflective of the ongoing significance of plays that address AIDS, of which the revivals of Angels and Rent were a part, that since 2007 plays addressing this issue have continued to be staged in London.

886 Ibid.
In 2010, a new Australian play called *Holding the Man*\textsuperscript{888} premiered in Britain, following its Australian premiere four years earlier. Based on the book of the same name,\textsuperscript{889} it was staged at the Trafalgar Studios.\textsuperscript{890} This staging indicates a perceived appetite among London audiences for a text that dealt with AIDS. The cast, a mixture of British and Australian actors, included well-known Australian television star Jane Turner.\textsuperscript{891} The play premiered in Australia in 2006, went on to be performed at the Sydney Opera House,\textsuperscript{892} and was staged in America before being seen in Britain.\textsuperscript{893} Here again, Britain was importing texts on AIDS, this time from Australia, but again following an American production. Clearly the pattern of following an American example in staging AIDS plays endured. *Holding the Man* had a successful run in London, being well-received by the critics, and their comments indicated that discussion of AIDS on stage remained an important issue. However, another Australian musical that has AIDS at the centre of its narrative, *The Boy From Oz*,\textsuperscript{894} has yet to be staged in London.

The staging of *Holding the Man* in 2010, after the revival of *Angels* and *Rent* – which may be considered the major theatrical texts on AIDS – indicates that the subject matter is not prohibitive to continued work, be that through new works or revivals. In 2014, a new play, *Positive*,\textsuperscript{895} premiered at Waterloo East theatre in London, indicating that AIDS remains a subject that fringe theatre in London depicts. Set in 2014, it deals with a HIV positive gay man in the twenty-first century, focusing on the challenges this presents socially and in forming a relationship. This play, along with the revival of *As Is*, the premiere of *Holding the Man* and smaller-scale *Rent* revivals, shows that interest in AIDS in drama continues in London. Finally, the revival of *My Night With Reg* by the Donmar Warehouse in 2014\textsuperscript{896} also indicates that interest in plays dealing with AIDS continues within London Theatre.

Revivals of other plays dealing with AIDS have also been seen in London since the 2007 revivals of *Angels* and *Rent*. In 2013, *As Is* – which was, as noted in the Introduction,

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{888} Conigrave Timothy and Murphy, Timothy, *Holding the Man*, 2010, Trafalgar Studios, directed by David Berthold.
\item \textsuperscript{889} Conigrave, Timothy, *Holding the Man*, Penguin Books, Camberwell, Australia, 1995
\item \textsuperscript{890} A theatre not considered a ‘West End’ venue, but centrally located, as the name suggests off Trafalgar Square
\item \textsuperscript{891} Jane Turner is best known for her role in Australian comedy series *Kath and Kim*, 2002-2005.
\item \textsuperscript{892} *Holding the Man* premiered at the Griffin Theatre Company in 2006, it was then remounted for the Mardi Gras Festival in 2007 before in 2008, being presented at the Sydney Opera House, Brisbane Powerhouse and Melbourne Theatre.
\item \textsuperscript{893} *Holding the Man* was staged in San Francisco in 2008.
\item \textsuperscript{894} Two slightly different versions of this musical have been staged, *The Boy From Oz*, by Nick Enright, Sydney Opera House, Australia, 1998. Performance and *The Boy From Oz*, by Martin Sherman, Imperial Theatre, New York, 2003, Performance.
\item \textsuperscript{895} *Positive*, Shaun Kitchener, dir James Callas Ball Waterloo East, London, 2007, Performance.
\end{itemize}
among the first full theatrical responses to AIDS – had its first revival in London at the Finborough theatre. A successful run that gained sell-out performances and favourable reviews, this, alongside several fringe productions of Rent in the 2012-2013 season\textsuperscript{897} indicates that texts on AIDS are still viewed as worthy of staging.

It is significant that during the early 21\textsuperscript{st} century New York theatre also began a series of revivals of these AIDS plays. This began with The Normal Heart in 2008, marking its Broadway debut.\textsuperscript{898} In London The Normal Heart was actually ahead of Broadway: the play had already been transferred from The Royal Court, where it made its European debut, to the Albery Theatre in the West End. In New York, a revival of Angels followed in 2010, this time at Off-Broadway venue Signature Theatre. The location of the re-staging indicates that, as in Britain, the risks in a more economically volatile Broadway were too great for such an undertaking, but for a smaller off-Broadway theatre the risk was acceptable. And sure enough, Angels proved a success. Following these revivals Rent, having closed on Broadway in 2009, was staged off- Broadway in 2011 directed by its original director Michael Greif. These revivals in New York show that interest from both directors and audiences in these key plays about AIDS remained strong though still not a ‘mainstream’ theatrical topic in London or at this point New York.

Rent and Angels are now historical pieces, which serve as both a reflection on a previous period and a reminder in terms of AIDS that there are still relevant points to be made about AIDS by theatre today. The significance of these plays, as discussed in the previous chapters, is wider than simply the depiction of AIDS and the educational benefit of such works. In the case of Angels, there is no direct successor for the theatrical model, or its impact on the theatrical landscape. Angels as a text may, in fact, be described as unique. Kushner’s style, as shown in Chapter 3, is an amalgamation of styles and influences. Angels, with its length, subject matter and collection of theatrical approaches, is something that the theatrical landscape had not seen before or, it is proposed, since.

\textsuperscript{897} At London’s Greenwich Theatre in 2012 and a large scale concert tour in 2013.

\textsuperscript{898} Previously The Normal Heart was staged at the Public Theatre, a not for profit off Broadway venue.
6.4.2 *Angels* and the National Theatre

*Angels* is part of a long line of innovative work at the National Theatre that continues to the point of its revival and beyond. In 2013 the National Theatre celebrated its 50th Anniversary. As part of the celebrations a gala performance featuring highlights from the history of the National was staged, including an extract from *Angels*. Performed by Andrew Scott and Dominic Cooper, the extract from Act 1 Scene 4 where Prior reveals his illness to Louis was part of a performance that was also broadcast around the world and recorded for a DVD. As a result of its inclusion there, *Angels* has been cemented as an integral performance in the repertoire of the National Theatre. Of all the new and classic plays staged at the National over half a century, Angels was selected to celebrate the National's success. Its importance as a work of drama, both to the world of theatre and to the National, is confirmed by Richard Eyre in his introduction to the extract when describes it as ‘The luckiest thing that happened to me while I was running the National Theatre’.\(^{899}\) He also comments that it had never been performed in America, and that by page 3 he knew he had to stage it.\(^{900}\) Eyre comments that *Angels* was about ‘sex, love and death which after all is the stuff of all good drama’,\(^{901}\) which indicates indicating that Eyre felt, and still feels strongly about *Angels* as a work of drama.

*Angels* forms part of a long line of new innovative and provocative works across the National’s repertoire. *Angels* was a significant production in both size and scope, and included controversial subject matter. The National has since continued to produce innovative and provocative works. These include Patrick Marber’s sexually provocative *Closer* (1997)\(^{902}\) and Mark Ravenhill’s exploration of gay sexuality in *Mother Clapp’s Molly House* (2001)\(^{903}\). The Cottesloe remained a place for new works to explore difficult subject matter through innovative theatre as typified in the highly successful *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time* (2011).\(^{904}\) The Cottesloe theatre closed in 2012 for renovations and will be renamed the Dorfman theatre when it re-opens.\(^{905}\) The artistic remit for the smaller space

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900 Ibid.
901 Ibid.
905 Following the largest single donation to the National by Lloyd Dorfman, the theatre formally known as the Cottesloe will be named after the donor that made the refurbishment possible. Details of the donation and the
providing an arena for new innovative works will continue in the refurbished theatre. Innovative styles of drama continue, with the critically-acclaimed adaptation of *Frankenstein* (2011)\textsuperscript{906} winning praise for its new spin on the classic narrative, and the theatrical device of the lead actors sharing the title role.\textsuperscript{907}

The National has continually demonstrated a commitment to innovative works on stage, in collaboration with other companies, as it did with Cheek by Jowl for *Angels*. The phenomenally successful adaptation of *War Horse* (2007) was performed in collaboration with South African company Handspring. *War Horse* has been a massive success, with worldwide productions and tours as well as a film version. It has, Daniel Rosenthal argues, assured that in 2015 new artistic director Rufus Norris will inherit an organisation in ‘the best financial shape of its life.’\textsuperscript{908} This will allow for further innovative work at the National to take place by assuring the financial health of the organisation. *Angels* did not determine this innovation, but it is part of a long term legacy of innovative theatre at the National. What the National also allows is experimentation with a reduction on emphasis on commercial theatre. Henry Goodman, of the original cast of *Angels*, writes of London theatre as suffering from ‘the pressure of “marquee” as it’s called in the West End, the pressure of getting ‘so and so’ off the telly, the pressure of making something successful, as a product before you start’.\textsuperscript{909} Goodman reflected that over its history, the National has allowed for a level of experimentation not found elsewhere in London theatre: ‘There’s something about being at the National which encourages you to find the balance between the vanities of theatre and the virtues of it.’\textsuperscript{910} This element of freedom allows the theatre to push forward with risk taking works like *Angels* or other innovative works.

The National Theatre continues to grow, and continues to innovate across its artistic repertoire. Replacing the Cottesloe with a temporary theatre space in 2013 allowed for a series of shorter runs from less established playwrights to take place under the National’s ‘umbrella’. In 2014, the National Theatre demonstrated an ongoing commitment to innovative theatre forms by collaborating with immersive theatre company Punchdrunk on


\textsuperscript{907} Actors Benedict Cumberbatch and Johnny Lee Miller shared the role of Dr Frankenstein and his creature giving a unique interpretation of Mary Shelly’s classic story which favoured the Creature’s point of view.


\textsuperscript{910} Ibid.
their production *The Drowned Man: A Hollywood Fable*. This immersive work is indicative of the continuing innovation across London theatre, and in the wider sense, across British theatre.

The National theatre also, a decade after *Angels* and five years after *Rent*, took its biggest risk in musical theatre production staging *Jerry Springer the Opera* (2003). So controversial that it elicited 55,000 complaints when broadcast on BBC, *Jerry Springer the Opera* indicated a development in both the National’s repertoire and the musical theatre of Britain. This development in musical theatre can, in part at least, be attributed to *Rent*.

Kushner re-visited the National with *Caroline or Change* (2003), a musical set in Louisiana, depicting a semi-autobiographical account of Kushner’s early life. Produced by the National Theatre on the Olivier stage in 2006, the musical score draws on blues and Motown influences. The production of *Caroline or Change* ran at the National from October 2006 until January 2007. Its presence at the National indicates a culmination of musical theatre changes and the National’s continued commitment to pursuing new innovative works. *Caroline* is not a musical that lends itself to commercial production, as perhaps the 146 performance run on Broadway in 2004 indicates. The subject matter, dealing with race and politics in 1953 Louisiana, would be challenging for a play, even more so when using the medium of musical theatre. What *Caroline* does is continue the legacy, of which *Rent* is a part, of musicals dealing with difficult topics and not simply being the preserve of love stories and dance routines.

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914 *Caroline or Change* ran at the Eugene O’Neill theatre in New York from 2nd May 2004-29 August 2004
6.4.3 Rent and Musical Theatre

That new musicals are now frequently compared to Rent illustrates further its place in the theatrical canon. That new musicals clearly draw on the influence of Rent also supports this argument. In terms of this musical style it is not the ‘rock musical’ that Rent led the way for; musicals had been following that template with varying degrees of success since Hair. Rent set a precedent for musicals following the music that its composer loved rather than some preconceived notion of what audiences would like. Larson’s blend of musical influences, from Sondheim to rock, infused Rent with a blend of Larson’s own influences. He developed his own style, which has become epitomised in Rent. Without Larson’s precursor, it is arguable that such models of theatre would not have endured. The genre reproducing faster than previous ‘rock opera’ or ‘rock musical’ models.

Larson’s work is obviously limited to what he was able to produce in his lifetime. Two musicals that continued his legacy in Britain are Larson’s own, Tick Tick Boom (2001),915 and Anthony Rapp’s Without You (2010),916 which uses many of Larson’s songs. Both have been staged in London, and therefore continued Larson’s work. In London, Tick Tick Boom was a highly successful production and intrinsic in the re-branding of The Meinier Chocolate Factory as one of the most prominent fringe venues for musical theatre. The Chocolate Factory has since produced musicals which have gone on to successful runs in both the West End and on Broadway.917 In 2012, original Broadway Cast member Anthony Rapp brought his one-man show Without You to London. Based on his memoir of the same name, Without You draws on the period in Rapp’s life around Rent. The musical touches also on the backdrop of death that the AIDS crisis had brought with it. Rapp uses some songs from Rent, re-arranged into solo versions, alongside some original material. It could be argued that Rapp has produced a more natural update or postscript to Rent in his reflective performance than Baker managed in his remixed version.

The staging of Tick Tick Boom and Without You, years apart from Rent itself and each other, illustrates a continued audience for material related to Larson and his work in Britain. Much of this has been sustained by fan engagement online. Online fandom became an

917 Successful productions from the Chocolate Factory include La Cage Aux Fölles, (2008) Sunday in the Park with George and A Little Night Music (2013) which all transferred to both the West End and Broadway for successful runs.
important part of *Rent*, with discussions illustrating both an on-going engagement with *Rent* by fans but also with the subject of AIDS on stage.

The significance of *Rent* on the British theatrical landscape can be seen through the continuation of the ‘rock’ genre within the musical theatre landscape. The most successful ‘rock musical’ in Britain is *We Will Rock You* (2002),\(^{918}\) based on the music of Queen and co-written by Ben Elton. It ran for twelve years in London, as well as having a highly successful international touring life. The original British rockmusical *Jesus Christ Superstar* (1970) had a high-profile return via Andrew Lloyd Webber’s televised search for a ‘Jesus’ to star in a revival of the production.\(^{919}\) American imports under the influence of pop/rock music have continued to have success in Britain, with *Rock of Ages* (2011) which uses 1970s and 1980s rock music as its score having a successful West End run and tour while *Jersey Boys* (2008), which draws on the story and music of Frankie Valli, was, at the time of writing, into its sixth year in the West End.\(^{920}\)

Original composition in musicals has continued to lean towards the pop-rock style of contemporary music, with leading pop stars branching out into musical theatre. Leading the field is Elton John, who collaborated with Disney on both *The Lion King* (1997)\(^{921}\) and *Aida* (2001)\(^{922}\). The former is having continued success in Britain, while the latter has yet to be performed in London. More recently, U2 singer and writer Bono wrote the music for *Spiderman: Turn off the Dark* (2011)\(^{923}\) on Broadway. The financial cost, and production problems that *Spiderman* had during its three-year run, means that it is unlikely to transfer to London. This cross-genre writing by leading musicians such as John and Bono, indicates the influence of contemporary music on the contemporary musical and that such stars are being attracted to write for musical theatre indicates a progression in the prestige of the genre. This continues with other composers: the work of George Stiles and Anthony Drew fuses influences of many generations of musical theatre, including *Rent*. Other British composers, including Tim Prottey-Jones and Robert Gould, are following the Larson approach of utilising contemporary music in a musical setting. Although the direct influence of *Rent*...
cannot be proved empirically, aside from those composers themselves citing Larson among their own influences, Rent does appear to have a prevailing shadow over contemporary musical theatre. In academic or press accounts of new musicals, it is frequently cited in analysis of musical theatre. Recent examples including Burce Kirle’s and Elizabeth L Wollman’s work. Both of these works cite Rent as an enduring influence on new musicals, indicating the importance afforded to the musical within the broader theatrical landscapes of both London and New York.

There are also many imported works that could be considered inspired by Rent, both in terms of musical approach and controversial content. Subsequent ‘rock opera’ or ‘rock musicals’ such as American Idiot (2004) and Spring Awakening (2006) both fuse controversial subject matter with a rock score, while also focusing on young people’s experiences. These musicals have done well in their transfer to Britain, indicating that musicals in the style of Rent, transposed from America, continue to be popular. In terms of musicals depicting uncomfortable or difficult topics, Kushner’s Caroline or Change, and the musical adaptation of Alice Walker’s The Color Purple (2005), have had successful productions in London. Both of these were outside of the commercial West End, at the National Theatre and The Meinier Chocolate Factory respectively. This indicates that while London musical theatre audiences are willing to be challenged by difficult material, it remains an unsafe bet for the West End. However, controversial American musical texts have still found success within the wider London theatrical landscape. A good example of this is Parade by Jason Robert Brown. Parade flopped in New York but was a sell-out during its run in London. This suggests that British musical theatre was, in certain respects, more open to innovation and boundary-pushing works than New York at this point.

926 American Idiot by Billy Joe Armstrong dir Mayer, Michael, 2009first performed at Berkley Repertory Theatre it later had a Broadway run at the St James’ theatre. American Idiot toured the UK during 2012 but has yet to have a West End run.
928 Spring Awakening based on the play of the same name, addresses issues of teenage sexuality and includes depictions of teenage suicide. While American Idiot deals with themes of drug and alcohol abuse.
929 Caroline or Change, Tony Kushner, directed by George C Wolfe 2007 (2003), National Theatre Olivier.
931 Caroline or Change was performed at the National Theatre in 2006, while The Color Purple was performed in 2013 at the Meinier Chocolate Factory.
932 Parade, by Jason Rober Brown, Played the Vivien Beaumont Theatre at the Lincoln Centre in New York from December 17, 1998 to February 28, 1999 Donmar Warehouse from September 24 to November 24, 2007
The most natural successor to *Rent* has yet to make the transition to Britain, and may be used to consider where such musicals in Britain go next. *Next to Normal*, like *Rent*, deals with difficult subject matter against a backdrop of a rock-pop score. It was directed by *Rent*'s Michael Greif, and is the only musical since *Rent* to win the Pulitzer Prize for drama and one of only eight overall to do so. *Next to Normal* deals with the subject of mental illness, depicting a family’s struggle with their mother and wife’s bi-polar disorder. British audiences took on the controversial subject of AIDS in *Rent* in 1998. It could be, perhaps, that mental illness is still considered too much of a taboo for producers to take the risk on *Next to Normal* in an unstable economic climate. Ironically, though the fact that the subject is taboo is all the more justification for artistic forms, such as the musical, to tackle it. As yet, however, this critically-regarded and challenging musical has not been seen in Britain. That *Next to Normal* has not transferred, despite a successful Broadway run, and the highest critical acclaim, indicates that there is still a discord between successful American musical productions and what is perceived as a potential successful investment for British theatre.

Rock musicals have become fairly mainstream in the West End and on Broadway. Musicals that deal with controversial or difficult subject matter are also increasingly common, though more so in the subsidised or fringe sector. The shifting economy of commercial theatre, and the risks involved in staging a new musical mean that risky content in an untested musical in the West End is probably a thing of the past. Even a proven commodity in New York is no guarantee of a West End success, but in the post-*Rent* period, London theatre has shown it remains open to importing innovative and challenging American musical theatre. In addition, native composers are also adopting and evolving the rock-musical time and tackling challenging topics. *Rent* and the theatrical landscape that it helped to create therefore may have left British theatre more open to evolutions in musical theatre.

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933 Kitt, Tom and Yorkey, Brian, *Next To Normal* (2008) was first performed off-Broadway in 2008 before transferring to Broadway in 2009, it has yet to be performed in the UK.

6.5 Evaluation of the study and further research

The plays chosen were appropriate for the research questions and for the analysis undertaken. These plays were chosen for their prominence both in AIDS drama and in the British theatrical landscape. Their contrasting theatres, the subsidised and the iconic National Theatre and a commercial West End theatre, provided a allowed for case studies from two major areas of British theatre.

6.5.1 Extension of the study: other AIDS plays

The plays *The Normal Heart*, *My Night with Reg* and *Holding the Man* are texts that would enhance reflection on *Angels* and *Rent*. While the reasoning was sound, in this context, for not dealing with these texts in-depth, I feel they are significant in the overall narrative of AIDS drama in Britain. *The Normal Heart*, as in America, is a watershed moment when staged in Britain for AIDS drama, in which AIDS drama gained attention for the first time; and the play was intrinsic in the success of *Angels* and *Rent* which followed. *My Night with Reg* is also significant as the first British play to deal with AIDS, and it remains one of the only texts to do so as part of its central plot. Finally, *Holding the Man*, being an Australian play, represents the only English-language AIDS drama from outside of Britain and America. Its performance in 2010 in London is significant in mapping the theatrical landscape of AIDS drama. These texts, therefore, could form the basis of additional work in this area; it is important, however, that they are recognised as an omission from this stage of the work, albeit for good reason. These texts are omitted primarily because at the point of writing, they have not been revived in Britain. The use of revival provided an important point of reflection for the plays considered, allowing a longer-term influence to be considered. In addition that *Angels* and *Rent* were produced at prominent but contrasting theatres, and used very different theatrical forms, allowed for the consideration of two very different kinds of AIDS plays. These other works would form the basis of future research.

In expanding the analysis, it would be useful to look at *The Normal Heart*, particularly in relation to the position of The Royal Court within the British theatrical landscape and therefore the significance of *The Normal Heart* having been staged here. The lack of British revival for Kramer’s text is of itself significant, particularly within the context of the recent American revival, the transfer to Broadway and the new version. In addition,
smaller scale, more recent revivals of the texts considered – particularly Rent, following the issues of Rent: Remixed – should be analysed. Equally, productions of Angels staged outside of large scale theatres and in its singular forms remain significant in the on-going theatrical discussion on AIDS.

The revival of As Is in 2013 indicates that interest in texts that deal with AIDS remains within theatrical and performance communities. Such sustained interest, illustrated also by the premiere of Holding the Man a few years earlier, means that there is scope for further discussion. In expanding this analysis to consider additional texts across a longer period, the on-going significance of transposing American theatrical texts on AIDS to Britain could be considered alongside the rise of other works.

6.5.2 Extension of the study: Rent online engagement and fandom

Online fandom and discussion has become an important part of theatre engagement for Rent fans. It has also meant those long after Rent left the British stage, fans can and have continued to engage with the show. As internet use expanded, particularly among the young, it is through online resources that younger theatre-goers and musical theatre fans hear about Rent. The use of online fan culture to support theatrical culture – and specifically that of Rent – has not been explored here as the scope of this work does not allow for sufficient attention and exploration of this area. Should this research be expanded, this would be one of the key areas explored. In researching this area further, I would use existing works on fan studies, particularly Matt Hills’ Fan Cultures,936 which includes substantial discussions on the evolution of online fan culture in the same period as Rent.937

This area is of significance to Rent’s success, and did probably contribute to, if not the transposition to Britain, then certainly the sustained interest in Rent in the years following the initial run. This cross-cultural engagement, which was present from the early days of Rent but has become particularly prominent with the rise of social networking in the last ten years, is an interesting facet in considering Rent and its continuing resonance. The connotations of, and research methods and processes needed for, a detailed investigation into online fan engagement alongside fan engagement in a live setting are, unfortunately, beyond the text, is likely. As the revivals of Rent and Angels followed the film versions, the possibility of a revival of The Normal Heart is increased.

937 Hills focuses on the evolution of online X Files fandom, which took place largely across the late 1990s, which coincides with Rent’s Broadway opening and the subsequent evolution of fan engagement with this and later other, Broadway shows.
parameters of this and this element was not intended to be part of the work. However, the
continued and contemporary online engagement is noteworthy here as it links to the wider
significance of Rent in the theatrical landscape. This is a rich and interesting aspect of theatre
culture. Should this research be expanded this would be central to future examinations of the
topic.

The use of online engagement by theatre fans is an area that has grown alongside
Rent. In 1996, the internet for social purposes was in its infancy. Across the fifteen-year run
Rent had on Broadway, and through the time of the subsequent British productions, theatre
fans developed in their use of the internet to engage with favourite shows and performers,
with Rent being a leader in this area. The demographic that Rent appealed to most were
young people who were gaining access to, and developing an interest in, the internet as a
social and fandom tool.

Periodically, a discussion on the text will occur on one of the major theatre discussion
sites that cater to both the US and UK such as Broadway.com, Broadwayworld, and What’s
on Stage. These discussions illustrate both an on-going engagement with Rent by fans, but
also with the subject of AIDS on stage. The international element of the discussions also
illustrates that this is far from an exclusively American theatrical or social concern. One such
discussion was begun by a user posting on theatre message board posted the following
question under the heading ‘Rent and the Aids movement’ on July 1st 2012: ‘How important
was RENT in giving the AIDS movement a ‘voice’?’ The response to such a question
indicates that fan engagement with Rent continues today. The responses also indicating the
effect Rent has had on these fans. There were a range of responses to the questions, which
included posters who were clearly of the generation who had lost friends to AIDS at the time
of Rent in NY. For example, in reaction to this, poster ‘LuvtheEmcee’ comments in detail:

I think one of the biggest things in did in terms of this was open that history up to the
younger people who were coming to see it. And I think you can say what you want
about the particular imagery Rent portrays, and agree or disagree with it, but it’s hard
to underestimate the power of putting that into a generation’s consciousness.

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938 These discussion boards can be found at <www.broadway.com>, <www.broadwayworld.com>, and
<www.Whatsonstage.com>
939 Qolibu, Rent and the AIDS movement,
940 LuvtheEmcee, Broadwayworld, (sic) 3rd July 2012
This poster goes on to say that while Rent is not unique in its subject matter, the level to which it has been effective in communicating its message is clear. The comments made by this user also indicate the potential for sophisticated analysis in fan forums. The online discussion later veered from the significance of a theatrical text dealing with AIDS to the nature of American theatre at that point in time, and that being filled with large-scale musical productions it was no longer dealing with any issue or creating larger cultural significance in any way. Here, following much discussion from the American perspective a British voice joins the discussion from poster ‘Songanddanceman2’:

In the mid-90s the adverts here in the UK that scared so many about AIDS had stopped… Rent at least kept reminding people that this thing is still out there. Like the show or not it spoke to a young audience about a serious issue, I will always applaud Rent for that.941

Another British contribution to the discussion links the significance of Rent for a British fan that despite the very different experiences (which he alludes to in his post) the importance of Rent as a theatrical text was still profound. Such comments indicate awareness and engagement from fans both in America and Britain, and indeed beyond the nebulae of London and New York as theatrical centres. This awareness of the wider implications of both of these texts on the subject of AIDS and their importance in Britain as well as America and a continuing engagement with texts that take on such subject matter.

6.5.3 Approaches to the study

Susan Bennett was quoted at the start of this chapter describing the different audiences who see a theatrical text, and the biases they bring to it. As Bennett also says, one single person can experience multiple reactions to a single performance.942 Such audiences may also, as Bennett describes in her own experience, see the performance through different eyes at different times. As she puts it: ‘sometimes I hear you from my position as a woman, sometimes as a professor, sometimes as a bourgeois’943 – a comment which demonstrates the complex relationship audiences and individual audience members have to a text. Indeed, from my own position, I have a personal relationship to these texts, as outlined in Chapter 1. Sometimes I view them as a fan of the plays, as a musical theatre fan, as a fan of certain

941 Ibid
943 Ibid.
actors involved. Other times I view them as an academic, as a woman, as a British person. All of these experiences and prejudices influence an audience reaction, and my own analysis – no matter how professional I may strive to be – will always be coloured by my experiences of these theatrical productions. These aspects make the focus on audiences in this work slightly problematic, and thus were not the focus of this thesis. However, I acknowledge that they also serve as an approach informed by Barthes and a move away from what he views as the problematic focus by basing analysis on ‘the author, his persona, his life, his tastes, his passions’. While the shift to audiences is problematic, as indicated, it is done consciously with awareness of the shortcomings.

In relation to qualitative research, having in other contexts interviewed people involved in these productions both formally and informally, I feel the use of interviews could have further enhanced the understanding of these works in context. Although the interviewing of directors, actors or other people responsible for staging these productions would have given the study a further dimension, this was not a realistic option at this point in time. The use of archival materials was therefore focused on as an alternative. For future research, however, due consideration would again be given to the benefits of interviews as an aspect of the study.

As noted, the use of archival work was an asset to this research. This archival work forms an integral part of the original contribution of my analysis. Using the National Theatre’s substantial record on Angels in particular gave an insight into the production that viewing the production alone could not do. Likewise, the use of the American archives to gain detailed information about the Broadway production of Rent, and to view other related productions on recording, was invaluable in creating context for this study. It should be noted, though, that use of archives can be problematic. Access to the physical archive and access to specific content may often be difficult. In this study, the ability to travel and utilise archives became an issue in expanding the archival work.

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6.6 Conclusion: Transposing American theatrical works on AIDS

The legacies of *Angels* and *Rent* are markedly different, but together, their significance as part of the theatrical landscapes and in the depiction of AIDS in theatre has been substantial. The creation of film versions and, in the case of *Rent*, a commercial recording, immortalised the plays for audiences worldwide. The fact that they have been revived on stage since these arguably seminal versions indicates their power as theatrical experiences. Equally, alongside the larger-scale professional productions cited, smaller companies, including schools and amateur companies, continue to produce both plays, which indicate the power of the texts.

In considering the future place of these texts and their place in the theatrical landscape of Britain, the evidence suggests that *Rent* will have an enduring theatrical life, probably in smaller-scale productions than the revival considered here. A flurry of performances between 2012-2013 shows that *Rent* in revival remains strong. Following the success of both the fringe productions and the concert tour mentioned previously, a further West End production would seem a possibility, likely sooner rather than later. The twentieth anniversary of the original production in 1995, or of the British production in 1998, seems too good a commercial opportunity to miss, even if just for a limited West End Run.

In the case of *Angels*, it is likely that both parts will not continue to be produced as frequently. It is likely that each part will be performed separately, and regularly, as they are important works stylistically, theatrically and in their subject matter. However, they are challenging works to stage, and they require from audiences not only intellectual investment but also a substantial investment of time. For these reasons, reviving *Angels* as a whole is a problematic endeavour. That said, British theatre does recognise the significance of *Angels*. For example, Kushner’s work is listed among the texts celebrated at the National Theatre’s 50th Anniversary Celebrations during 2014. This indicates that *Angels* is a significant part of the National Theatre’s history - and by default British theatrical history.

There is clear evidence that these plays worked in Britain, however the texts were also produced differently and received differently in London to their native New York. As Sharland comments, ‘Even when the same shows are produced in both cities, unless the entire cast is the same the result will be different’. Even *Rent*, which had the same director and

945 Listed among the NT’s key plays from the past 50 years and included in the programme of celebrations as works being discussed/revisited *Angels* is clearly prominent in the NT’s history.  
<www.nationaltheatre.org.uk/discover-more/welcome-to-the-national-theatre/50th-anniversary>

cast in New York and London, would still be a different production for an audience. Similarly, it must be taken into account that the audiences’ taste may be different. Again, to quote Sharland, ‘The audiences do not like the same things, they do not laugh at the same jokes, so shows can succeed on Broadway and flop in the West End and vice versa.’ While it has been shown that neither of these shows was a flop in London, neither was perhaps the phenomenon they were in New York. They are, however, still the most memorable and critically highly-regarded AIDS plays that London has seen.

In their own ways, both successfully depicted AIDS on the British stage. Through political, medical and emotional ties, the impact of AIDS was successfully communicated to audiences in Britain. The legacy of these texts, in their own revivals and in their successors, and their place in the British theatrical landscape, is clear. This makes Angels and Rent not only successful transposed texts on AIDS to the London stage, but successful and important parts of the British theatrical landscape in their own right.

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Appendices
Appendix 1 AIDS Timeline 1981-2007

Statistical information gathered from AVERT. This timeline focuses only on the period examined up to and including the revivals of the plays. More detailed timelines for UK, America and worldwide can be found at: www.AVERT.org including information up to 2014.

1981: Centres for Disease Control (CDC) in America first recorded cases of rare cancers and pneumonia associated immune deficiency.

First case in UK of a man with PCP (Pneumocystis carinii pneumonia), a rare condition later associated with AIDS the first known AIDS case in the UK.

1982: AIDS, Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome is first used as a term.

One of the earliest UK AIDS patients, Terry Higgins, died. A group of his friends subsequently set up The Terrance Higgins Trust, the UK’s first AIDS organisation.

1984: HIV (human immunodeficiency virus) is isolated by Luc Montagnier of the Pasteur Institute in Paris and Robert Gallo of the US National Cancer Institute.

By the end of 1984 there were 108 cases of AIDS and 46 deaths in the UK

1985: Rock Hudson reveals he has AIDS.

By the end of the year, 20,303 cases of AIDS worldwide reported to the World Health Organization. Of these cases 275 had occurred in the UK.

1986: First AIDS public information campaign, in the UK, full-page newspaper adverts with the message ‘Don’t die of AIDS’

1987: The UK government's ‘Don't Die of Ignorance’ campaign is launched.

Needle exchanges are first piloted in the UK.

The first antiretroviral drug, AZT, is approved in the US.

HIV testing is introduced across the UK.

The 1988 Local Government Act passed. In Section 28, it forbade the promotion of homosexuality by local authorities, stating that no local authority was permitted to:

- Intentionally promote homosexuality or publish material with the intention of promoting homosexuality
- Promote the teaching in any maintained school of the acceptability of homosexuality as a pretended family relationship

1989: The first HIV awareness materials targeted at gay men produced by the Health Education Authority.

American drug AZT shown to slow down the effects of AIDS. However British authorities request further testing before making it widely available.

The Cabinet Committee on AIDS disbanded because it was felt that it had achieved its main objectives.

1990: The prime minister, John Major, announces that the government will pay £42 million compensation to haemophiliacs and their dependents infected with HIV.

The BBC soap opera Eastenders runs a storyline in which Mark Fowler, a major character, is found to be HIV positive, raising awareness of the condition. Following this a spike in requests for HIV testing occurs.

1991: Freddie Mercury, lead singer of Queen, dies of an Aids-related illness.

The Red Ribbon becomes the international symbol of HIV.

The US Food and Drug Administration licences the first rapid HIV test.

Ten million people around the world HIV positive. AIDS kills more men aged 25 to 44 than any other condition.

1993: During January, 116 new cases of AIDS reported in the UK, bringing the cumulative total to 7,045.

The 1993 Education Act makes sex education in schools mandatory, including education about HIV, AIDS and other sexually transmitted infections.


The first combination therapy - HAART, (highly active antiretroviral therapy) is approved for use in the US.

By the end of 1995, the overall total of reported HIV infections in the UK at 25,689. The number of reported AIDS cases at 11,872, approximately 70% had died.
1996: UNAIDS is established.

1996 is acknowledged by AVERT as the point at which people with HIV/AIDS began to live longer healthier lives. The effectiveness of protease inhibitor drugs, which were relatively inexpensive, meant that in the UK treatment was largely accessible to all who needed it.

1998: Trials of a vaccine against HIV.


The first year, in Britain, that new heterosexual infection numbers were greater than new infection rates in gay men.

2000: The highest number of new infections in the UK in one year at 3,000 new diagnosis.

Section 28 of the Local Government Act was repealed in England and Wales.

2001: Drug companies abandon their opposition to the generic production of antiretroviral.

2002: The Global Fund for the fight against HIV/Aids, malaria and TB is set up.

2003: Results of the first major HIV vaccine trial AIDS VAX.

2004: Government legislation removes a clause stating that anyone who had resided in the UK for 12 months, legally or illegally, had a right to free HIV treatment on the NHS.

2005: International leaders commit to universal access to treatment at the G8 Summit in Gleneagles.

About 1.3 million people in developing countries have access to treatment.

In January, Labour MP and former culture secretary Chris Smith announces that he had been HIV positive for seventeen years.

2006: About 38.6m people estimated to be living with Aids worldwide.

2007: There were 7,734 HIV diagnoses in 2007, the highest number ever reported in the UK.
Appendix 2 AIDS plays and Performance (Selected Bibliography)

A select bibliography of plays dealing with AIDS and the year of first performance.

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Rock, Michael Kearns (1992)

The Baddest of Boys, Doug Holsclaw (1992)

The Destiny of Me, Larry Kramer (1992)

Queen of Angels, James Carroll Pickett (1992)

My Queer Body, Tim Miller (1992)

Lips Together Teeth Apart, Terrance McNally (1992)

Myron a Fairy Tale in Black and White, Michael Kearns (1993)

What are Tuesdays Like? Victor Bumbalo (1993)

Roy Cohn/Jack Smith, Ron Vawter (1993)

Love! Valour! Compassion! Terrance McNally (1994)

Lonely Planet, Steven Dietz (1994)

Angels in America, Tony Kushner (1994)

My Night With Reg, Kevin Elyot (1994)

Jeffery, Paul Rudnick (1995)

Rent, Jonathan Larson (1996)

Shopping and Fucking, Mark Ravenhill (1996)

The Boy From Oz, Nick Enright (1998)

A Life in Three Acts, Bette Bourne, Mark Ravenhill (2009)

Holding The Man, Timothy Conigrave and Timothy Murphy (2010)


Without You, Anthony Rapp (2011)
Appendix: 3 AIDS in Film and Literature

Select bibliography of film and literature that depicts AIDS as part of the central narrative.

AIDS in Film, Television and Documentary

*Bright Eyes* (1984)
*An Early Frost* (1985)
*No Sad Songs* (1985)
*Buddies* (1985)
*Parting Glances* (1986)
*A Plague on You* (1986)
*As Is* (1986)
*Intimate Contact* (1987)
*Go Toward the Light* (1988)
*Family Values* (1988)
*Longtime Companion* (1989)
*Common Threads* (1989)
*Andres’ Mother* (1990)
*Born in Africa*, part of PBS's *Frontline* and *AIDS Quarterly* (1990)
*Our Sons* (1991)
*Jerker* (1991)
*Citizen Cohn* (1992)
*On Common Ground* (1992)
*The Living End* (1992)
*Chain of Desire* (1992)
*And the Band Played On* (1993)

The Broadcast Tapes of Dr. Peter (1993)
Médecins de cœur (1993)

Silverlake Life: The View from Here (1993)


Sex Is (1993)

Grief (1993)

Zero Patience (1993)

Philadelphia (1993)

One Foot on a Banana Peel, The Other in the Grave (1994)

The Last Supper (1994)

Boys on the Side (1994)

Valentine's Day (1994)

Mensonge (1993)

Jeffrey (1995)


Kids (1995)

The Cure (1995)

The Immortals (1995)

My Brother's Keeper (1995)


Chocolate Babies (1996)

In the Glooming (1997)

Love! Valour! Compassion! (1997)

Gia (1998)

All About My Mother (1999)

Angels in America (2003)

The Witnesses (2007)
Precious (2009)

Philomena (2014)

The Dallas Buyers Club (2013)

AIDS in Literature


Gale, Patrick; The whole day through; Harper Collins (London) 2009

Graham, Clayton, Tweeds, Stamford CT: Knights, 1987


Kramer, Larry; Faggots, Random House, New York, 1978


Miller, Tim; Shirts and Skin, Alyson Books, New York, 1997


McGehee, Peter, Boys Like Us, St. Martin's, New York, 1991.

Monette, Paul; Borrowed time an AIDS memoir, Harvest Books, Orlando, 1988


Moore, Oscar; PWA looking AIDS in the face, Picador (London) 1996
A matter of life and sex, Penguin (London) 1991

Moore, Patrick, This Every Night, Amethyst, New York 1990.


Appendix 4 *Angels in America* character list and plot summary

**List of Characters:**

**Prior Walter** – A gay man and former drag queen from New York who has AIDS. His boyfriend at the start of part 1 is Louis Ironson, he is close friends with, and used to do drag acts with Belize. He begins to experience visions of an Angel. He is a ‘WASP’ (White Anglo-Saxon Protestant) who proudly charts his family history back as far as the Bayeux Tapestry.

**Louis Ironson** – is a Jewish gay man from New York works as a ‘word processor’ at the federal appeals court. He is Prior’s boyfriend at the start of *Millennium*. He later begins a relationship with Joe Pitt.

**The Angel of America** - A divine presence who descends from Heaven to bestow a prophecy on Prior. The Angel seeks a prophet to overturn the migratory impulse of human beings. She is played by a female actor but is multi gendered.

**Emily** - A nurse who attends to Prior in the hospital. Played by the same actress who plays the Angel, she also seeks to instruct Prior.

**Harper Pitt** – A Mormon originally from Salt Lake City now living in Brooklyn with her husband Joe Pitt. She takes valium and has hallucinations while under their influence. In one such dream she meets Prior. She discovers that her husband is gay and struggles with it, considering it a betrayal of her marriage.

**Mr. Lies** - A travel agent who resembles a jazz musician, Mr. Lies is one of Harper's imaginary creations. She summons him whenever she wants to escape from her present surroundings.

**Joe Pitt** – Originally from Salt Lake City, also a Mormon, now working as a clerk at the U.S Court of Appeals. He is Harper’s husband and Hannah’s son. He is befriended by Roy Cohn who wishes to assist him with his career. Joe is gay but closeted and in denial at the start of the play. Later he begins a relationship with Louis.

**Roy Cohn** – Based on real life Roy Cohn. A New York lawyer who was gay but closeted for his entire life. He insists on hiding his diagnosis as Liver Cancer.
**Ethel Rosenberg** – The ghost of a woman executed for being a Communist spy, based on the real life Ethel Rosenberg. She visits Roy, during his feverish moments whom she blames for her conviction and execution.

**Hannah Pitt** – Joe's mother, a Mormon from Salt Lake City. She moves to New York after her son drunkenly comes out to her on the phone. She arrives to find that Joe has abandoned his wife; eventually she befriends Prior and helps him.

**Belize** – A former drag queen, he is Prior's ex-boyfriend and best friend. He later becomes Roy Cohn's nurse.

**The Voice/Angel** – A messenger from Heaven who visits Prior and tells him he's a prophet.

**Henry** - Roy's doctor.

**Rabbi Isador Chemelwitz** - An elderly rabbi who delivers the eulogy at the funeral of Sarah Ironson, Louis’ grandmother, at the start of the play.

**Martin Heller** - A Justice Department official and political ally of Roy's.

**Sister Ella Chapter** - A real estate agent who handles the sale of Hannah's house in Salt Lake.

**Prior I and Prior II** - Prior's ancestors who are summoned from the dead to help prepare the way for the Angel's arrival. Prior I is a medieval farmer, Prior II a seventeenth-century Londoner. Both men died of the plague in their era.

**Aleksii Antedilluvianovich Prelapsarianov** - The World's Oldest Living Bolshevik, who delivers the tirade that marks the beginning of Perestroika.

*Other roles including ‘woman in the Bronx’ and a variety of Angels Prior encounters in Heaven are performed by the same actors playing the above roles.*
Plot: Part 1 Millennium Approaches

New York in 1985, the audience meets Prior Walter dealing with his AIDS diagnosis. Prior and his boyfriend Louis’ lives become entwined with that of Joe and Harper Pitt. On the morning of Louis’ grandmother’s funeral Prior reveals he has AIDS. Prior has hidden his illness until now out of fear Louis will leave him. On the same day Joe Pitt is offered a prestigious job in Washington by powerful Republican lawyer (and closeted gay man) Roy Cohn. Joe’s wife Harper is suffering a variety of emotional problems and a valium addiction and begs Joe not to take the offer.

A few days later, Joe stumbles upon Louis crying in the bathroom of the courthouse where he works, and they strike up a friendship and Louis suspects that Joe is gay. Harper and Prior also meet, in a fantastical mutual dream sequence in which Prior, operating on the “threshold of revelation,” reveals to Harper that her husband is a closeted gay man.

Meanwhile, Roy Cohn, based on the real life lawyer, and Republican Party supporter, also learns that he has AIDS but vehemently denies his sexuality. He forces his Doctor, Henry to be complicit in hiding his sexuality and his illness by saying he has liver cancer.

As Prior’s illness deteriorates so does his relationship with Louis, and when Prior is in the hospital Louis seeks out anonymous sex in the park. Having met Joe while crying in the toilets at work, the two develop a friendship and at the end of Millennium begin a relationship. Joe phones his Mother in Salt Lake to come out to her, she dismisses his confession but afterwards sells her house and plans to move to New York to ‘save’ her son and his marriage.

Meanwhile Prior has been having hallucinations that involve a heavenly voice (the Angel). Parallel to this Harper’s delusions grow worse as her husband grows more distant and leaves her. Prior’s friend Belize has stepped in to help take care of him, but even he is sceptical about Prior’s claims of an Angelic visitor.

At the close of Part 1, Prior is visited by his ancestors (Prior 1 and Prior 2) who conjure up a vision of Louis who dances with Prior. When Louis disappears the Angel whose voice he has been hearing since Act 1, crashes through his ceiling.
Part two, Perestroika

Prior is alive if damaged, believing his visions have made him a prophet. Louis and Joe continue their relationship marred by Joe’s on-going insecurity with his sexuality and Louis’ guilt over Prior. Meanwhile Harper is left with her mother in law Hannah who has travelled from Salt Lake City to attempt to fix her Son’s marriage. Harper begins Perestroika believing that her imaginary friend Mr Lies has taken her to Antarctica, in fact she is in Prospect Park in Brooklyn where she has gnawed down a pine tree with her teeth. Hannah begins to look after Harper, taking her to work at the Mormon visitor centre. Where they both eventually meet Prior.

Roy’s health deteriorates, further and he checks into the same hospital where Belize is on duty, Belize spreads the gossip of Roy Cohn’s illness to Prior while Roy continues to deny his sexuality and his medical condition. Roy insults Belize with racist taunts but Belize anyway gives him valuable advice on his treatment. While his vehement denial of his condition and sexuality continues and like Prior and Harper he too experiences visions, in his case of Ethel Rosenberg who he sent to the electric chair. Meanwhile, he is under threat of being disbarred for his unethical actions but vows to fight the judgement and remain a lawyer until he dies.

Prior tells Belize the full story of the Angel’s visit from the end of Millennium following a friend’s funeral. After her dramatic arrival, through his ceiling, the Angel gives Prior a holy book and says that she seeks his help to halt the migratory tendency of human beings. She explains that God, left Heaven forever on the day of the 1906 San Francisco earthquake, and since then his Angels-whose vast powers are fuelled by constant sexual activity-have been alone. To reverse the trend, the Angel says humans must end their constant motion, their addiction to change. Prior is aghast at her words and vows to flee from her at all costs.

Louis and Joe’s relationship continues but Louis tries to make amends with Prior. Fuelled by his belief he is a prophet Prior behaves strangely and rejects Louis-he insists on ‘visible wounds’ to indicate Louis’ true contrite nature. Louis then hears of Joe’s close relationship with Roy Cohn and confronts him over his political allegiances. They fight, and break up. Meanwhile Roy himself has procured some experimental AZT drugs, that may help treat
AIDS but his condition is still deteriorating. He dies and Ethel and Louis-coerced by Belize-recite the Kaddish, the Jewish prayer for the dead.

Prior, sees another vision of the Angel, who this time takes him to Heaven. In Heaven Prior meets Sarah Ironson-Louis’ dead grandmother, he also finds Harper (who isn’t dead just hallucinating again) with his missing cat. He is then taken to the ‘Continental Principalities’ an array of Angels, Prior meets with them and elects to return to earth with a demand for ‘more life’ and a condemnation of God. Meanwhile Roy dies shouting angrily at the Universe. Joe finds himself without Louis who tries and fails to resurrect his relationship with Prior while Harper leaves Joe and New York for San Francisco.

In an epilogue, set four years on summarising the characters’ lives to this point; Prior is still living with AIDS which he has done, he quips ‘6 months longer’ than his relationship with Louis. Hannah is still in New York and has befriended the group, Louis and Belize are still friends with and supporting Prior. The quartet, meet at the Bethesda Fountain in Central Park, and bicker about contemporary politics while Prior offers a final innovation to the audience: ‘You are fabulous creatures each and every one. Bye now. The Great work begins.’
Appendix: 5 Tony Kushner Selected Plays and Writings.

Selected Plays (Listed by Premiere production)


La Fin de la Baleine: An Opera for the Apocalypse, New York, Ohio Theatre, 1983.

The Heavenly Theatre, produced at New York University, Tisch School of the Arts, 1984.

The Umbrella Oracle, Martha's Vineyard, The Yard, Inc..


Stella (adapted from the play by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe), produced in New York City, 1987.


Hydriotaphia, produced in New York City, 1987 (based on the life on Sir Thomas Browne)


Slavs! Thinking About the Longstanding Problems of Virtue and Happiness, Theatre Communications Group, 1995 & acting edition, Broadway Play Publishing Inc..

A Dybbuk, or Between Two Worlds (adapted from Joachim Neugroschel's translation of the original Yiddish play by S. Ansky) Joseph Papp Public Theater, New York, 1997.

The Good Person of Szechuan (adapted from Bertolt Brecht), Arcade, New York, 1997.


*Helen* produced at the Joseph Papp Public Theater, 2002.

Only We Who Guard The Mystery Shall Be Unhappy, 2003.

The Intelligent Homosexual's Guide to Capitalism and Socialism with a Key to the Scriptures, Minneapolis, Guthrie Theater, 2009.

*Tiny Kushner*, (five shorter plays) Guthrie Theater, Minneapolis, 2009

**Plays (Significant London Productions)**

Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes, Part One: Millennium Approaches, National Theatre (Cottesloe), 1993.


Caroline or Change, National Theatre Olivier, 2006.


**Film**

*Munich*, directed by Steven Spielberg (2005) - screenplay (co-written by Eric Roth)

*Lincoln*, directed by Steven Spielberg (2012) - screenplay

**Books**

Thinking about the Longstanding Problems of Virtue and Happiness: Essays, a Play, Two Poems, and a Prayer, Theatre Communications Group, New York, NY, 1995.


Essays and Articles


"Notes About Political Theater," Kenyon Review, 19 (Summer/Fall 1997): 19-34.

"Wings of Desire". Premiere, October 1997: 70.

"Fo's Last Laugh--I". Nation, 3 November 1997: 4-5.

"Matthew's Passion". Nation, 9 November 1998


"A Word to Graduates: Organize!". Nation, 1 July 2002.

"Only We Who Guard The Mystery Shall Be Unhappy". Nation, 24 March 2003.

Awards

1993 Drama Desk Award for Outstanding Play – Angels in America: Millennium Approaches

1993 Pulitzer Prize for Drama – Angels in America: Millennium Approaches.

1993 Tony Award for Best Play – Angels in America: Millennium Approaches

1994 Drama Desk Award for Outstanding Play – Angels in America: Perestroika

1994 Tony Award for Best Play – Angels in America: Perestroika

2002 PEN/Laura Pels International Foundation for Theater Award for a playwright in mid-career

2004 Primetime Emmy Award for Outstanding Writing for a Miniseries, Movie or a Dramatic Special, Angels in America

2007 Laurence Olivier Award for Best New Musical – Caroline, or Change

2008 Steinberg Distinguished Playwright Award

2011 Puffin/Nation Prize for Creative Citizenship[24]

2012 St. Louis Literary Award
2012 New York Film Critics Circle Award for Best Screenplay - Lincoln

2012 Paul Selvin Award - Lincoln

2013 Elected Member, American Philosophical Society.
Appendix 6 Rent Plot Summary

Characters

Mark Cohen: A struggling filmmaker and the narrator of the show. He is Roger's and Collins's roommate until Collins moves out; he is also Maureen's ex-boyfriend.

Roger Davis: A once successful but now struggling musician who is HIV positive and an ex-junkie. His girlfriend, April, killed herself after discovering out that she was HIV positive. He is roommates with Mark.

Mimi Márquez: A club dancer and drug addict. She lives downstairs from Mark and Roger, and is Roger's love interest and who like him, she has HIV. She is also Benny's ex-lover.

Tom Collins: Mark and Roger’s former roommate and a professor. He has AIDS, is described as an ‘anarchist’ and now dreams of opening his own restaurant. He meets Angel when he is beaten up on the street corner in front of Mark and Roger’s apartment and they form a relationship.

Angel Dumott Schunard: A young drag queen and street performer with AIDS. Collins's love interest.


Joanne Jefferson: Maureen’s girlfriend, an Ivy League-educated public interest lawyer. Joanne has very politically powerful parents (one is undergoing confirmation to be a judge, the other is a government official).

Benjamin "Benny" Coffin III: Former friend and roommate of Mark and Roger and he is the owner of the building. He is also Mimi's ex-lover.
Plot Synopsis

Act 1

*Rent begins* on Christmas Eve and takes place in New York’s East Village. The audience meets Mark and Roger (Tune Up #1) on Christmas Eve. Mark has begun filming a documentary about his friends. Tom Collins, their old friend, comes to visit them but is attacked by thugs and lies bleeding on the street. Meanwhile, their former pal Benny, who bought Mark and Roger's apartment building and the lot next door, calls and asks for the rent, which he knows they don't have. (Tune Up #2). The power to Mark and Roger's apartment shuts off, and they vent their frustrations about being broke starving artists unable to pay the rent (Rent). Maureen calls Mark to repair the sound system for her against Joanne's wishes, and Mark agrees to help against his better judgment because he is still in love with Maureen. Mark and Roger decide to rebel against Benny and refuse to pay their rent.

Angel, a drag queen and street drummer, spots the injured Collins and comes to his aid. They are attracted to one another and quickly discover that they both have AIDS. (You Okay Honey?). Meanwhile, Mark asks Roger to join him in attending Maureen's protest in an effort to get him out of the house, but Roger declines. Mark reminds Roger to take his AZT, making the audience aware that Roger is HIV positive. He also reveals that Roger's girlfriend, April, committed suicide after finding out that they were both HIV-positive (Tune Up #3). Roger sings about his desperate need to write one great song to make his mark on the world before he dies of AIDS (One Song Glory). Mimi, a nineteen-year-old junkie and S&M dancer from the apartment below asks Roger to light a candle for her (Light My Candle).

Collins finally makes it to Mark and Roger's apartment, bearing gifts of food and vodka, and introduces Angel in full drag (Today 4 U). Benny arrives and tells Mark and Roger that he will guarantee that they can live in the apartment rent-free if they convince Maureen to cancel her protest. Mark refuses, Angel and Collins invite Mark and Roger to attend Life Support, a local HIV support group meeting (You'll See).

Mark arrives at the lot to set up Maureen's sound equipment and meets Joanne. They become friends after venting their frustrations with Maureen, (Tango: Maureen). Mark then joins Collins and Angel at the Life Support meeting, for people living with AIDS (Life Support). Mimi returns to Roger's apartment and playfully asks him to take her out (Out Tonight), and
he and drives her out of his apartment (Another Day) and he joins the others at the Life Support meeting, and everyone sings of the fear and uncertainty in their lives (Will I?).

After leaving Life Support, the friends save a homeless lady being beaten by a police officer, only to be reprimanded by her for being pretentious artists (On The Street). As they walk away contemplating her response, Collins starts to fantasize about living in an idealized Santa Fe, where the climate and the people are much warmer (Santa Fe). Collins and Angel sing about their romance and officially become a couple (I'll Cover You). Joanne gets ready for the protest and her upcoming legal case (We're Okay). Roger apologizes to Mimi and invites her to the protest while the police and Benny prepare for the protest (Christmas Bells).

All of the friends attend Maureen's performance (Over The Moon). The protest ends in a riot that Mark catches on camera, and a local news station purchases the footage. Afterwards, the group go to the Life Cafe, where Benny is eating. Benny mocks the protest and the group's Bohemian lifestyle, in response, all the bohemians in the cafe rise up and celebrate (La Vie Boheme). In the middle of all this, Mimi's beeper goes off reminding her to take her AZT, and Roger and Mimi discover that they are both HIV-positive. With this news, they finally start a relationship (I Should Tell You). Joanne informs everyone that the homeless are refusing to leave the lot despite police presence (La Vie Boheme B). The act closes as Mimi and Roger share "a small, lovely kiss."

Act 2

The cast assembles on stage (breaking the narrative and fourth wall slightly) and sing about the various ways one can measure a year (Seasons of Love).

It is New Year's Eve, and Roger, Mark and Mimi try to break into their building with the help of their friends. (Happy New Year ). Alexi Darling of "Buzzline," a tabloid news show, had seen Mark's footage of the riot and offers Mark a contract (Voice Mail #3). Angel gets the door open, and they celebrate. However Benny appears and asks Mark to film him offering a rent-free contract, Mark and the others become annoyed at this publicity stunt and Benny makes comments about an alleged affair with Mimi that incenses Roger. Angel eventually convinces everyone to calm down, Roger and Mimi make up, but Mimi is still upset and sneaks off to buy heroin (Happy New Year B).

On Valentine's Day, Maureen and Joanne have a fight while rehearsing for a new protest, and break up again (Take Me or Leave Me). The cast poses the question, "How do you measure a
last year on earth?" (Seasons of Love B). Mimi and Roger continue to fight and Angel's health seriously deteriorates and Collins tries to nurse him/her back to health. All the couples lament being alone and eventually make up (Without You). Alexi keeps calling Mark to try to convince him to join Buzzline (Voice Mail #4). Angel dies in a fervent dance number (Contact) and Collins is heartbroken. At Angel's funeral, all the friends celebrate Angel and mourn their loss (I'll Cover You (Reprise)). Mark and Roger fight and Mark reveals his fear of being the lone survivor when the rest of his friends die of AIDS. Mark accepts the offer from Alexi and Roger reveals he is leaving New York (Halloween). Mimi is distraught and admits she needs help with her drug addiction. Benny offers to pay for her treatment (Goodbye Love).

In Santa Fe, Roger cannot forget Mimi and Mark, while in New York Mark misses his friend Roger. They both find new resolve and commitment to their art, and rekindle their friendship (What You Own). It is Christmas again and all the characters' parents try to reach them, leaving messages. (Voice Mail #5). Mimi is missing but Mark, Roger and Collins are together again on Christmas Eve. Outside they hear Maureen and Joanne call for help, they have found Mimi and she is gravely ill. Mimi tells Roger that she loves him (Finale A). Roger sings the song he has written for Mimi, thinking it is his last chance to say goodbye. (Your Eyes). Miraculously, Mimi comes back to life, saying Angel told her to come back. The story ends happily with the cast reprising ‘Seasons of Love’.
Musical Numbers

Act 1

"Tune Up #1" — Mark and Roger

"Voice Mail #1" — Mark's Mother

"Tune Up #2" — Mark, Roger, Collins and Benny

"Rent" — Mark, Roger, Benny, Collins, Joanne and Company

"You Okay, Honey?" — Preachers, Angel and Collins

"Tune Up #3" — Mark and Roger

"One Song Glory" — Roger

"Light My Candle" — Mimi and Roger

"Voice Mail #2" — Mr. and Mrs. Jefferson

"Today 4 U" — Collins, Roger, Mark and Angel

"You'll See" — Benny, Mark, Roger, Collins and Angel

"Tango: Maureen" — Joanne and Mark

"Life Support" — Gordon, Paul, Mark and Company

"Out Tonight" — Mimi

"Another Day" — Mimi, Roger and Company

"Will I?" — Steve and Company

"On the Street" — Preachers, Squeegee Man, Mark, Collins, Angel and Homeless Woman

"Santa Fe" - Collins, Angel, Mark and Company

"I'll Cover You" — Angel and Collins

"We're Okay" — Joanne

"Christmas Bells" — Company

"Over the Moon" — Maureen

"La Vie Bohème A" — Mark, Waiter, Roger, Benny, Mimi, Collins, Angel, Maureen, Joanne, Mr. Grey and Company

"I Should Tell You" — Mimi and Roger

"La Vie Bohème B" — Maureen, Collins, Joanne, Mark, Angel and Company
Act 2

"Seasons of Love A" — Company

"Happy New Year A" — Mark, Roger, Mimi, Collins, Angel, Maureen, and Joanne

"Voice Mail #3" — Mark's Mother and Alexi Darling

"Happy New Year B" — Mark, Roger, Mimi, Collins, Angel, Maureen, Joanne, and Benny

"Take Me or Leave Me" — Maureen and Joanne

"Seasons of Love B" — Company

"Without You" — Roger and Mimi

"Voice Mail #4" — Alexi Darling

"Contact" — Angel and Company

"I'll Cover You" (Reprise) — Collins and Company

"Halloween" — Mark

"Goodbye Love" — Mark, Roger, Mimi, Collins, Maureen, Joanne, and Benny

"What You Own" — Roger and Mark

"Voice Mail #5" — Roger's Mother, Mimi's Mother, Mr. Jefferson, and Mark's Mother

"Finale A" — Preachers, Mark, Roger, Collins, Maureen, Joanne, and Mimi

"Your Eyes" — Roger

"Finale B" — Company
Appendix: 7 Jonathan Larson Plays and Writings

Plays (as Writer/Composer)

A Darker Purpose, Naked Angels Theatre, New York City, 1991 (Composer)
A Midsummer Night's Dream, New Jersey Shakespeare Festival, Drew University, Madison, New Jersey, 1991 (Composer)
Superbia, Playwrights Horizons Theatre, New York City (Writer/Composer)

J. P. Morgan Saves the Nation, New York City production, 1995 (Composer)
Tick, Tick. Boom! New York Theater Workshop (Writer/Composer)

Other

Sesame Street, Composer/Lyricist, PBS, Various dates 1990s

Away We Go! PBS, 1996.

An American Tail (Composer, book on tape) N.D

Land Before Time, (Composer, book on tape) N.D

Awards

1995: Outer Critics Award, Best Musical (Off Broadway).
1996: Tony Award, Best Musical, Best Book of a musical, Best original Score.
1996: Drama Desk Award, Outstanding Book of a Musical, Outstanding Music, Outstanding Lyrics.
1996: Drama Critics Circle Award, Best Musical.
1996: Pulitzer Prize, Drama.
Appendix 8 Productions of *Angels in America* and *Rent*

**Angels in America**


Rent

1996, National Tour ‘Angel Leg’, USA, directed by Michael Grief.
1997, National Tour ‘Benny Leg’ directed by Michael Grief.
1999, Australian Tour (beginning in Sydney)
2001, British Tour.

December 4, 2001 to January 6, 2002, Prince of Wales Theatre, London (final leg of British Tour)

2002, British tour.

December 6, 2002 to March 1, 2003, Prince of Wales Theatre, London, (final leg of British Tour)

2005 to 2008, American Tours running concurrently across the country.

2005-2006 International Tour started in Singapore and also included; Hong Kong, Beijing, Shanghai, Wuhan, Seoul, Taipei, Tokyo, Bangkok, Amsterdam, Rotterdam, Brussels, Antwerp, Barcelona, Madrid, Stockholm, Reykjavik, Oslo, Helsinki, Copenhagen, Cape Town, Johannesburg, St. Petersburg, and Moscow, Budapest.

2006, Manchester Palace Theatre

2008, Manchester Palace Theatre ‘Goodbye Performance’

2009-2010, American Tour featuring original cast members Anthony Rapp and Adam Pascal. Tour stops included Los Angeles, Seattle, Costa Mesa, Toronto, Phoenix, Sacramento, Orlando, Miami, St. Louis, Milwaukee, Chicago, Des Moines, Cincinnati, Pittsburgh, Norfolk, and Houston.

2010, Hollywood Bowl Production, directed by Rent alumni Neil Patrick Harris, two days of concert-format performance at The Hollywood bowl.

2010, Hollywood High School, the first High School in America to perform Rent.

2013, *Rent in Concert*, UK Tour, a concert-staging version of the musical toured mid-sized concert halls across Britain.

2013, Greenwich Theatre, London.

2013, Tabard Theatre, London.

2013, Royal Welsh College of Music and Drama, the first use of *Rent* as a professional production staged in a University environment.

2014, Melbourne, Australia.


These productions represent an overview of significant productions, current licencing is owned by Music Theatre International, who also holds the licence for the School’s edition.

Since the closure of the Broadway version and the end of the National Tours, licence in America is granted to professional and amateur productions wishing to stage *Rent*. In Britain, following the final tour in 2007, and the amended version in *Rent: Remixed* the licence to perform *Rent* has been bought to perform *Rent* by a variety of smaller theatre companies, including the touring version and some key productions listed above.