A TPQ Interview: Tony Kushner on Theatre, Politics, and Culture

Jill Taft-Kaufman

In this interview, award-winning author Tony Kushner discusses his ideas on theatre, education, activism, politics, Afghanistan, and human loss. The depth and breadth of Kushner’s responses address the America we once were, currently are, and might become through transformation.

Keywords: Tony Kushner; Theatre; Brecht; Political Activism; Angels in America; Homebody/Kabul

Tony Kushner has won virtually every notable award an American dramatist can receive. His plays, as well as his essays and his activism, have also made him the recipient of a Spirit of Justice Award from the Gay and Lesbian Advocates and Defenders, and a Cultural Achievement Award from the National Foundation for Jewish Culture. His early plays include A Bright Room Called Day, which is about the final days of the Weimar Republic, and Slavs (Thinking about the Longstanding Problems of Virtue and Happiness). He has written adaptations of Corneille’s The Illusion, S. Y. Ansky’s The Dybbuk, and Bertolt Brecht’s The Good Person of Sezuan. His epic two-part play, Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes, produced on stage in the early 1990s, placed gay life within our larger national life. Calling it “the broadest, deepest, most searching American play of our time,” critics credited it with being a “radical rethinking of American political drama.”

The prolific work that Kushner has done in the new millennium has reflected his versatility and his passion for art and politics. He wrote the screenplay for Angels in America, which was made into an HBO production. His children’s book, Brundibar, a collaboration with illustrator and friend Maurice Sendak, revived a story based...
upon a Czech opera performed by children in the Nazi concentration camp, Terezin. His text for *The Art of Maurice Sendak, 1981–Present* came out in 2003, as did a collection of his recent essays, *Save Your Democratic Soul!* He has also published a collection of writings called *Wrestling with Zion: Progressive Jewish-American Responses to the Palestinian/Israeli Conflict*, co-edited with Alisa Solomon. His autobiographical musical, *Caroline, or Change*, opened at the Public Theater to remarkable reviews. This collaboration with George C. Wolfe and Jeanine Tesori is based upon Kushner’s boyhood in Lake Charles, Louisiana. Critics call it a “new turn” for stagecraft and the musical genre because of its imaginative conception and its text on racism.

Tony Kushner came to Central Michigan University on November 26, 2002, as part of our Speakers Series. Instead of giving a speech, Kushner requested the format of an interview. I served as interviewer and escort for the 24 hours he spent with us. Because this interview was designed for a campus community, the questions are broad.

The interview took place soon after Kushner’s play, *Homebody/Kabul*, had been produced. In this play a British woman, the Homebody, ruminates on her fascination with Afghanistan. Seen only in the first act of the play, the Homebody soon disappears into the country of her musings. The play, written before September 11, 2001, generated public astonishment because in it a character presciently predicts that the Taliban are coming to New York. The range and depth of the play attracted critical notice. Reviewers noted that nearly a decade after *Angels*, Kushner had reaffirmed his status as one of the most important and dynamic contemporary dramatists in the world.

Immediately before the interview, Kushner read for us from two works. The first reading, which Kushner performed in concert with two of our students, was the initial scene from a play that he had started to write three days before his visit to campus. He called the play *Only We Who Guard the Mystery Shall Be Unhappy*. The title is a quote from Dostoyevsky’s “The Grand Inquisitor,” an excerpt from *The Brothers Karamazov*. In the scene, which might again be called “prescient,” an angel visits Laura Bush and takes her to read to dead Iraqi children who have been killed by American bombs. The scene has since been published in *The Nation*. His second reading was from the first act of the play *Homebody/Kabul*. It is an extended monologue by the Homebody, who ponders the nature of Afghanistan and western involvement in that country.

This interview has been condensed for publication.

**TPQ:** I want to ask you something about what the Homebody says. She says that the present is always an awful place to be. Could you speak to us about the art form of theatre and how it helps us address the present.

**TK:** It’s always arguable. I mean the present is always awful. You can turn to any element in history, and you’ll find somebody complaining about it, how terrible it was and how much better it was ten years earlier. I think that’s sort of an inescapable condition of being alive and being human. There’s awful and then there’s awful. I
mean, I feel at this moment that we’re alive right now, and maybe it’s because I’m 46 years old and I’m getting tired, but I don’t think I’ve ever read about a time in human history as dangerous as this. I always thought that the middle of the twentieth century, around the year 1939, was probably the darkest moment that the human race faced, having survived World War I, having gone through the horrors of World War II, sliding into Fascism and sliding into World War II. That must have been unbearable for any kind of alert, thinking person. But I think that was nothing compared to what we’re going through now. I think it’s a time in which despair is an easy trap to fall into. I think despair is always a trap. I don’t think that people should despair if they can possibly avoid it, if the biochemistry is set up in such a way as to allow them to escape despair. I think they have a moral obligation to try and figure out where hope can be found and go for it. But I think this is certainly a time in which it’s very difficult to locate plausible occasions to hope, and I don’t recall anything during my lifetime that compares to this. So, I think that theatre and art have a number of values in helping people get through life. I think that theatre teaches certain ways of looking at the world and of understanding the world, of reading the world critically in a complicated way, a dialectical way.

So, I think that theatre is always useful. I think theatre is pleasurable and I think this is a world that’s increasingly an-edenic towards the things that make us human, the fact that we’re all animals, and we like to be happy, and we like things that make us feel good, and we’re sensual beings. And I think that this world is increasingly toxic. It increasingly punishes the body. It increasingly substitutes real human eroticism and cathexis and the investment of feeling and love in romance with creeping commodified fetishism. You don’t love anybody else, but you love your automobile because it’s sitting there in that garage waiting for you every morning. And it really loves you, and it’s perfect and shiny and will never get old and never die. It’s an increasingly inhuman world, but I think there is something inescapably non-commodifiably about theatre because it’s never the same. It’s always about failure, because theatre always fails. It never successfully creates illusion. And even if it succeeds sometimes, it succeeds less brilliantly when it’s at the same time failing. And it’s a chance for a lot of people to gather together in the dark. And there’s something sexy about that. I’m sure you’re all feeling enormously sexy right now [laughter]. So I think theatre is useful in that way. I mean, my standard response to your question is that I think that theatre can help; I think being a teacher can help; I think that reading books can help; I think that talking to friends can help; I think that being a doctor or a nurse, anything other than an investment broker or a Republican, helps [laughter]. But I think that really there is nothing that substitutes for political activism. So, I think that one shouldn’t answer your question and say, “Theatre will help you get through this tough time.” Of course, theatre won’t. You’ll be sitting in a theatre like this, watching a good play or a bad play, or at home watching television, or doing whatever it is you like to do, playing with your kid, when something horrific happens that you might have stopped had you been politically active. And because we actually live in a working pluralist democracy and are citizens of a democratic republic, not disenfranchised yet, I think that we have
a moral imperative to act and to organize. There’s no action that replaces this sort of dull, boring work, and sometimes it’s very dull and boring and inconvenient organizing, this hands-on, body-present, not-on-the-internet activism.

TPQ: Your own preparation for where you are at this point in life has been through varied means. As a student, you didn’t emphasize playwriting. You got a BA in medieval history. Correct?

TK: I was a Medieval Studies major at Columbia. There was no theatre major, which I think is a good thing.

TPQ: I would be curious as to why you say that and what sort of an education you prize as a way to keep yourself a vital citizen, a vital human, and, of course, a professional, too.

TK: I think I’m a real child of the Enlightenment, and I really believe in the liberal arts, and I believe in liberal arts education. I don’t think a fine arts education is a substitute for it. I feel that undergraduate theatre training is vocational education. I think it’s training for a career. And I think it’s great. If you’re an actor, if you really want to be a serious actor, you have to do a conservatory training program at some point. I don’t actually think I’ve ever met an eighteen-to-twenty-one-year-old who’s ready to do a conservatory training program, because conservatory training is, first of all, about stripping you of everything you thought you knew about acting. If you talk to anybody in a good conservatory program, you’ll hear that it’s a miserable experience, makes them fall apart. It’s like psychoanalysis for the first year. And in the old days, when you started psychoanalysis, you didn’t work. You just did psychoanalysis five days a week, because you were going to become dysfunctional for a while, and then you sort of put yourself back together. I think that acting training, in a sense, is like that. At any rate, I think there’s nothing you need to learn; it’s not like being a dancer. If you’re going to be a dancer or an oboe player, you have to start when you’re five or eight or ten, because you have to train your body to do this thing that it’s simply not biologically equipped to do. And that takes an incredibly long time. But there’s nothing in the theatre profession in acting, directing, playwriting, designing that requires you to train your body in that way at eighteen. What I do believe is that the genius of this system is that, at eighteen, you’re old enough and together enough and have enough energy so that when you become an old, desiccated wreck, which happens about five or six years later [laughter], you still have the energy of youth (and old people like me hate you for it), and you’ve got four years in which society will leave you alone, basically, to read. You’ll never have that time again. Ever, ever, ever. For most of us, that four years is an unbelievably important opportunity. If you don’t lay the groundwork to become a really educated person in those four years and have read the ridiculous amount that a good liberal arts education provides, as I’m sure you can find here—if you don’t get that in those four years—I worry that you won’t ever be able to get it again. Because you’ll never have those four years again, unless you do something extraordinary and drop out. But in this economy, there’s no safety net anymore, so it’s not something that
anybody could necessarily advise that you do. That’s what freaks me out about it. I think it’s a replacement of liberal arts training with vocational training, because we all know what happens when there are too many students reading too many dangerous books. You have the sixties. You have the student revolution and the French Revolution. You have the 1848 revolution. Students are a dangerous political force. So, I believe there’s a sort of maligned political will. It may not be any one person’s decision, but I believe there is a political reason why the liberal arts education is more and more being replaced by training for jobs. And I don’t think you should necessarily, as an undergraduate, be training for a job. I don’t think you should know what you want to do yet.

TPQ: So, you think that one of the reasons why career training and professional training is emphasized is so that younger people don’t read and they don’t become dangerous?

TK: Yeah. I think New York City in the university system was a gateway for generations of immigrants to become middle class. People who came from Europe, who were desperately poor and oppressed, and beaten-up people from all over Europe, arrived in New York, and they had access to an absolutely astonishingly great education. I think, for a number of reasons, including racism, that system has more and more become unavailable. And one of the “great accomplishments” of recent mayoral and gubernatorial administrations in New York City and State has been to replace “useless things,” like a history degree, with a degree in physical therapy. Of course, we need physical therapists. They need to be trained, but I would actually rather have physical therapists who spent the first four years reading literature and philosophy and history and then got the two or three years that you need to become a really good physical therapist after that.

There are some things that a civilized society should have. It should have a completely indolent group of eighteen-to-twenty-one-year-olds. That’s what civilization strives for. People should want to have kids that are really well-educated in elementary and secondary education so that they’re ready to spend four years having their minds ripped to shreds by great teachers and great books. And then, because a civilized society is a confident society, we know that we can re-assimilate them into some kind of social order, and they’ll change the social order into something more progressive.

A civilized society has free theatre. It has theatre tickets that cost $3 or nothing. It doesn’t have theatre where every ticket for anything good costs $50 to $100. That’s not civilized. And these are things that we aim for. It has universal health care. These are marks of a civilized society. It’s what a certain part of human history has been straining for a very long time. I find it kind of scary that we’ve replaced those values with the notion that you should simply be trained for your place in the market, and that that’s the only meaning in life, which is, I think what’s really underneath the notion that undergraduate degrees are for vocational training.

TPQ: So the market is part of the substitution …
TK: If you listen to what’s coming out of Washington, the market is everything. We’re going to have this lottery now for third world countries. If they’ve shown real fidelity to free market systems, they can get billions of dollars from the United States. That’s been in place for years, but now they’re making it incredibly explicit. Yeah, the market is God. The market is the answer to everything. All boats will rise. Life will be very happy, and all people will realize their potential, if we only allow Ken Lay to do what he wants to do. And Dick Cheney. Then everything will be fine. That’s what we’re told daily.

TPQ: You put a tremendous value on the intelligence of your audiences, and we certainly heard that in your readings. You believe in their ability to listen and to hear and then, ultimately, to maybe have a smidgeon of transformation that they will take out of the theatre. In a previous interview, you stated that, in this country, many artists seem to have distaste for political theatre and, therefore, don’t see their audiences quite the same way you do. And at the time when you were interviewed, you said that you couldn’t figure out why that was. That was a while ago. Have you given that any more thought? Do you know why, in this country, political theatre which views the audience with intelligence and the ability to transform is considered boring and …?

TK: Did I actually say that? Well, I say all sorts of things.

TPQ: I’m paraphrasing. What you said is that you thought that in this country, there were many people who considered politics and theatre to not be a terribly palatable combination…. 

TK: I think that Americans tell themselves this thing over and over again, people who talk about theatre, which is one-tenth of one percent of one one-hundredth percent of the people of this country, who think about theatre at all. That great line in The Simpsons, when Homer (I think he’s watching some television variety show) turns to Marge and says, “I’ve seen plays better than this, Marge – PLAYS!” I know exactly what he’s talking about [laughter]. I think all theatre is political. I think that American theatre is almost always political. The three greatest American plays, Streetcar Named Desire, Long Day’s Journey into Night, and Death of a Salesman, are absolutely political plays.

Streetcar Named Desire is about the rape of a woman. It’s about the complete lack of economic power that women wield, and I don’t think that’s in any way stretching it. The big thing about Blanche DuBois is that she’s lost, progressively, any kind of economic basis, which reduces her both to alcoholism and then something close to prostitution and destitution, which is why she winds up with Stella and Stanley in New Orleans, and why those bus tickets back to Laurel are such a death sentence for her. And then she’s raped by him. So I think it’s a very, very political play about gender politics and about money.

Long Day’s Journey into Night is a play about Irish immigrants. It’s again extremely obsessed with the question of money; Tyrone’s stinginess, his refusal to send his own son to get decent medical care. It’s also about a lack of universal health care, and I
think it’s a play, without any stretch again, about a very specific aspect of the Irish American immigrant experience. Even though Sidney Lumet’s film of Long Day’s Journey is absolutely astonishing, with Jason Robards and Katherine Hepburn’s greatest performance, the mistake is that the greatest British actor, I think, of the last century, Ralph Richardson, is completely miscast. He’s British, not Irish. He doesn’t get what Tyrone was about. But I think it’s a completely political play. And, also, if you read Long Day’s Journey, it talks about the American character, people that O’Neill calls the “fog people,” and the natural eloquence of the “fog people.” And it’s really a play about America. Long Day’s Journey into Night is about the American journey.

And then, of course, Death of a Salesman is just completely obviously political. Willie Loman doesn’t make any sense, unless you consider his economic circumstances. He had a happy family life. He’s not a product of a bad family. He had a sort of idyllic family life, and then he became a salesman. It’s probably the greatest play about money ever written. Some of Shakespeare is better, but all of Shakespeare is better than everything.

I think that we write political plays. The play that won the Pulitzer last year by Suzan-Lori Parks (I think Suzan is a genius), Top Dog/Underdog, is about family and psychology, but it’s also about politics. It’s a play about two African American brothers; one is named Booth and one is named Lincoln—and guess which one shoots the other at the end of the play? There’s a kind of weird idea that politics isn’t about psychology, or that politics isn’t about family, or that politics isn’t about daddies, and mommies, and brothers. Of course, politics is just another aspect of human behavior. And I think one of the great things about American democracy is the way in which it has carved out space in the American soul. It’s a political ground, across which all sorts of human issues—sexuality, gender, fear of the other, identity pride, hope—traverse. So, I think that politics is an inseparable fact of life, and all plays talk about it in some way or another. Some plays do it more overtly than others. And I think there’s this weird thing—probably originates, I think, in the McCarthy era—when there was a determined effort to try and rid American theatre and American film of its political, left-political, content. I think that people were traumatized and frightened to death by that, and I think that that’s probably why, in a way, political theatre became a dirty word. It’s also a reactionary response to the sixties, when everything was enormously solidified and very political.

I love Laura Bush, as you can tell, and she just did this big literary brunch in Washington. And The New York Times said, “You’ve invited all of these people, like David Levering Lewis and all these historians who are critical of your husband’s policies in Iraq. Doesn’t that bother you?” She said, “This is not about politics. It’s about literature, and there’s nothing political in American literature” [laughter]. It made me so happy. That’s when I thought, well, I’m going to write a play about that. And, by the way, the “Grand Inquisitor” from The Brothers Karamazov is actually her favorite piece of literature.

TPQ: It is?!
TK: Oh, yes. I didn’t make that up. Apparently, she reads three or four books a week. She’s a librarian, she’s a schoolteacher, she’s apparently incredibly smart, and she’s married to this man with apparently a genetically-inherited language disorder [laughter]. So, Dostoyevsky makes incredible sense. I mean, she married the devil. It’s something that Dostoyevsky knew a lot about.

TPQ: Tell us about your fascination with Afghanistan, which started in the mid-sixties. Have you always been interested in it? And what led you to write the play that has been so highly touted recently?

TK: I call myself a socialist, because I believe that there is a category called economic justice. Justice is not simply confined to the social realm, but actually money and justice have an incredibly intricate relationship, and there is a thousand-year-and-longer tradition of millenarian and socialist thought that is of incredible beauty and power and importance, which certainly arrives in modern times calling itself socialist. I make most meaning of the world when I read the history and ideas of any number of great socialist thinkers, including Karl Marx. So, I think that there’s a lot of juice in the idea and I don’t want to let go of it yet. It doesn’t mean that I don’t think that capitalism also has amazing things about it. I do. Capitalism unleashed tremendous energy in the world and changed the world. Marx felt the same thing. But I don’t believe that capitalism addresses the question of economic justice.

Yet, look at all of the terrible things that have been done in the name of socialism. One of the most terrible things, certainly, is Stalinism, the worst thing that ever happened to a great idea, and the way that the world’s first socialist country turned into such a horror. I feel like it’s a great mistake of people on the left to try and distance themselves from that history. Quasi-socialist totalitarianism, which is, I think, a failure of the left, was carried out by, in many instances, people with ambitions and dreams that are very recognizable to me. That’s very upsetting. But I can’t not look at that. So, when I was a college student and I first became really interested, by reading Brecht and then reading Marx, in socialism, I decided that I also had to, at the same time, pay attention to what was going on in the name of socialism. My father, who is a very interesting guy and a very deep thinker, helped me figure this out. I’m beginning to realize, more and more, how much of an influence he had in this regard.

I’ve always loved Russian literature; so I started reading a lot of modern Russian history. This was in the eighties and the Russian army was in Afghanistan, destroying the country and behaving horrifically. I thought I had to pay attention to that, and I hated Reagan. I still hate Reagan. I have an obsessive mania about the guy. He was convenient to hate, because almost everything he did was evil. It was good to have a goblin that behaves consistently [laughter]. But I saw myself sort of torn about the question of supporting the Mujahideen. I thought that they should be supported. These were the tribal groups, these incredibly brave people that were fighting this gigantic, immensely powerful modern military machine with, in some cases, guns that were left over from the Anglo-Afghan war. And they won, like the Viet Cong
beat the American army. They eventually succeeded in driving the Russians out of Afghanistan. I believe that, in part, they did it because of Reagan’s assistance. But, also, what was happening was that the Reagan administration was making a great deal of money for its patrons of the weapons manufacturing industry, dumping unbelievable amounts of firepower into the hands of these guys who, before the Russians arrived, had a lot of problems with each other and then, as soon as the Russians left, immediately turned on one another and began a seven-way civil war of, I think, greater ferocity than any war I’ve ever read about. By the time the Taliban appeared in the mid-nineties, the country had sunk into a kind of heavily militarized chaos. It was really just unbearable to contemplate. I felt, as an American citizen, that I had a direct responsibility for that. My tax dollars and my government had armed these people with warehouses full of sidewinder missiles and incredible firepower, an inexhaustible ability to destroy. The whole country was reduced to rubble, more in the period after the Soviets withdrew than during the whole Soviet occupation. So, I felt that I had to pay attention to Afghanistan for that reason.

And then, it’s sort of true of everybody who reads about Afghanistan, you fall in love with the country. It’s the most amazing country on earth. Everybody who ever mattered in human history has, at some point or another, marched across Afghanistan. It’s literally at the center of the world. So, I became obsessed with the history of the place. I’m Jewish. Also, I’m a gay man. So I thought the Taliban were going to be difficult to confront. In some ways, as horrendous as the Taliban were – they were grotesque, awful people – they also saved Afghanistan. They pacified eighty percent of the country and did it very quickly, in about a year, with Pakistan and America’s help. They disarmed and pacified the country and stopped the civil war. Then, of course, things got bad and the world abandoned Afghanistan, once the Taliban were in control, even more thoroughly than it did before, which allowed Afghanistan to be a place in which a group like Al Qaeda and Bin Laden could operate. So there was nothing magical about seeing the threats of this horror, because the World Trade Center was bombed in 1993 by the same cast of characters that then drove the planes into it. So, what I wrote in 1997 [in Homebody/Kabul] was, one of the Afghan characters [says to] a British woman who [the Afghan character] thinks is American, “You love the Taliban so much, why don’t you bring them to New York! Don’t worry. They’re coming to New York!” Then after we were in rehearsal with Homebody/Kabul, when 9/11 happened, everybody said, “How did you know that?” That’s the horror of 9/11; we all knew it. It was incredibly clear that this was going to happen. Of course, nobody in America knew anything of the magnitude of 9/11, but something really horrific was going to happen.

TPQ: The Homebody at one point says, “The touch which does not understand is the touch which corrupts. The touch which does not understand that which it touches is the touch which corrupts that which it touches and which corrupts itself.” Can you expand on that idea, referring to colonizers and colonized and our role in the world?
TK: I’m a person of very strong opinions, but I feel, as a playwright, you shouldn’t write what you are absolutely certain of, talking down to an audience, because you mentioned earlier about the intelligence of an audience. The minute any group of people gather into a room, the IQ level of the room goes up about ten or fifteen points. I absolutely believe this. In fact, it’s true. People become more progressive when they’re gathered in groups. I think people become smarter when they’re in a group. They can also become mobs. It’s not like it’s all one thing and not another. But I think, in a theatre (which is not conducive to people turning into mobs), a group of people all focuses on one thing on the stage, and you just know immediately; audiences gain an instant personality. That’s the great thing about doing theatre. Everybody who does it knows this. Each audience has a distinct personality, and it’s very smart. That animal out there in the dark is extremely smart, and it’s very impatient, and you can’t bore it. If you are talking down to it, you’re telling it things that you already know. If I want to write a play about being gay (I’m working on a new play about it now), and I try and imagine an audience full of Trent Lott and Jessie Helms, it could be an incredibly boring play, because all of the rest of us are far along, and Trent Lott and Jessie Helms are never going to change anyway. They’re too old and too stupid, and they were stupid and old when they were ten. So there’s no hope for them (they probably don’t go to the theatre anyway) [laughter]. And I don’t think that it would be interesting to sit and listen to a play that sort of says over and over again, “It’s okay to be gay. Don’t pick on us. We’re nice people.” Or whatever it is. And, of course, a lot of gay theatre is about that. And it makes me insane. What I have to assume is everybody from the get-go understands what I understand, which is, of course, we’ve all gotten over that in 1967. Only an idiot, the bigot, thinks that it’s bad to be gay. So, we all know that. A lot of us are gay anyway, especially in the theatre [laughter]. What else can we talk about? What else is on our minds? Because being gay is not a simple thing. It’s a very complicated thing, and all sorts of other things touch on being gay. So you want to start out saying, “Like you, I have a lot of questions and a lot of uncertainties,” the whole preaching to the converted thing. Martin Luther King and John Donne were preaching to the converted. And, you know, people in church are the converted, and that’s who people preach to. St. Paul was preaching to the converted, sometimes to the non-converted. But now, when he’s read in church, it’s people who already believe in him. Does that mean that he has no value? No, of course not. Because the work is prodigious, and deep, and profound—faith is a very complicated issue. Belief is a very complicated issue. Identity is. So, it’s a great place to start, with your own confusion. And Afghanistan confuses the hell out of me.

In a way, I think all that the Homebody is saying, which is a really long way of getting back to your question, is that there’s a necessity to surrender a kind of arrogance of assumption that comes with being rich and privileged and a citizen of an outrageously powerful country which sometimes behaves appallingly badly elsewhere in the world.

In some ways, we’re still a republic, and, in other ways (I tried disbelieving this for a long time), we really are behaving more and more like an empire. We’re a
democracy here and anti-democracy everywhere else, in large measure because of American exploitation elsewhere. As we approach the elsewhere, as we go out of our borders (and 9/11 was a huge, horrific invitation to do that), how do you do that? How do you go to a country like Afghanistan, reading about it or actually traveling there, especially a country that you have man-handled or that your country has man-handled? You have to approach it with an acceptance, at least at the beginning. That understanding is the most difficult thing in the world, and yet it’s the task. It’s kind of like the Talmud. I mean, you won’t get it, but you have to keep trying to get it, and you have to understand that part of trying to get it is an understanding of the immense difficulties of getting it: surrendering intellectual arrogance, surrendering assumption, surrendering the notion that the world has to fit into some ideological model that you’ve cooked up to make the world simple and explicable to yourself. She’s [the Homebody] also talking about her daughter who’s a big mess, and she’s talking about a lot of other things. She’s somebody who’s terrified of herself and of the poison that she feels she’s full of. So that’s also what she’s saying.

TPQ: Your characters are rounded, full of many emotions and attitudes. Partly in the service of your not speaking down to your audience, your characters leave us with a lot of questions. I’m wondering about forgiveness. At the end of Angels in America, a theme of forgiveness is quite strong. You make your characters, even the unattractive ones, attractive in some fashion. They can be understood, if not empathized with, sympathized with. What about in your latest play?

TK: I don’t think Homebody is about forgiveness. I think it’s a lot more about death and loss, which Angels is about as well. It’s about letting go. If there is a God, she or he didn’t do very well in designing human beings. I don’t think that people lose well. It’s a problem in our makeup. It’s also what makes us into people. But I think that loss is suffered terribly by people, even if they’re not aware of it. I think there’s something conservative and inflexible deep in the human heart that from the time that you’re very young, change is suffered terribly; loss is suffered terribly. The new is very frightening, and I don’t know that we really change very much in that regard. I don’t think that we’re equipped to handle the death of someone that we love because, of course, we are not individual. I mean, we may not be some sort of giant faceless collective, but to say that we’re hermetically sealable, completely private, completely disconnected single human beings is nonsense. That’s not true. People are in large measure who they are connected to, and when you lose somebody that you really love, you lose a part of yourself, and you really lose it. It’s not Tuesdays with Morrie. It’s not a growth experience. You may learn certain kinds of wisdom. You learn that you can survive something terrible, but you also know in your heart of hearts that you survived it less, in some ways, than you were before, even if you’ve gained in other ways. That’s a terrifying thing. The heart’s bodily integrity, the integrity of the soul, is something that we count on. We do a lot of work from the age of nothing to pull all of that stuff together into some sort of artificial thing that we call an individual and to have it violated by death, which is what happens by the death of other people, is really, really hard, and I think people don’t handle it well.
I think that’s in *Angels* and is very much what *Homebody/Kabul* is about, and Afghanistan, in a way, seemed to me like a good place to go to think about that issue.

**TPQ:** *Angels* has just been made into a six-hour HBO mini series.

**TK:** We’re not allowed to call it a mini-series. We have to call it a film, because a mini-series division is a separate division, and they’re upset that anybody should think it was a mini-series. It’s just a very long movie [laughter].

**TPQ:** Al Pacino and Meryl Streep. Did you have any say in the casting at all?

**TK:** I said yes! [laughter]

**TPQ:** Was there a lot of adjustment you needed to do from play script to screenplay?

**TK:** No. I mentioned before I was working on it with Robert Altman, at first, for a big-screen adaptation. I’ve never written a screenplay that I’ve liked. I’ve never had one filmed. I’ve been hired to do a couple, which mostly turned out to be disasters. I don’t understand film. I’m really bad at math. I can’t figure out which is my left and my right. I’m always turning into the wrong lane. I’m sort of a scary person in that way; there’s something wrong with my brain. So, the idea that people actually figure out things like angles and shots, et cetera, is like, “Oh my God!” And I don’t understand it. It just feels like algebra in high school. So, I’m not a movie person. But television feels much more like theatre, because it’s a box, and it’s small, and because the picture, even on the big wide screen thing, doesn’t begin to compare with a real movie screen. So it can’t be, in a way, about spectacle. It has to be about talking heads. And most people still have normal television sets anyway. And it’s really about the basic two/three camera sitcom shot. It’s like Raymond–Raymond’s wife, Homer–Marge, Marge–Homer, that kind of thing [laughter]. So, it’s dialectic. It’s about an exchange of ideas or something between two people. So, it feels like home to me. I didn’t feel frightened about writing a television play. Mike Nichols is directing it, and he’s somebody who’s spent as much of his life in the theatre as he has in film. He’s directed lots of really important productions on stage and screen, so he knows something about making plays and films, and he has great respect for plays. Right from the beginning, Pacino worked off of the paperback copy of the play. He never wanted to touch the film script at all. It was that close to the play. And the play is actually sort of written like a movie. It’s seventy-one scenes, and it’s hundreds of different locations, and there are split scenes, where two scenes are going off simultaneously and they’re interwoven, just like quick cutting the film. So, it already had its kind of cinematic thing.

**TPQ:** And that’ll be out next year?

**TK:** In the fall. So, subscribe to HBO.

**TPQ:** [To the audience] He was saying that *The Sopranos* is definitely a reason for subscribing in general.

**TK:** *The Sopranos* is all the reason anybody needs.
TPQ: [To the audience:] It’s getting late, and Tony will be speaking to us tomorrow morning as well. So, let me open this up to you for questions.

Audience Member: As far as being a playwright, what thought processes do you go through when you’re first starting to get ideas for a new play. How does it transcend onto the paper, and, secondly, how much consideration do you give to the reactions of your audience and how they’ll receive the things that you write?

TK: How much do I want to be specific? Control what they get? Not at all. If I’ve done a lot of research, a lot of thinking beforehand, and I take my time with it, and I don’t take the easy way out ever, then I want the play to be, probably more than anything else, in addition to being an entertaining play, I want it to be useful. I feel that I have to trust that its usefulness will manifest itself to different audience members and different audiences at different points in time, and I can’t control that. I would never be able to say what Angels in America is about. I mean you can say it’s about forgiveness, and it’s definitely, on a level, about that. I said Homebody/Kabul is about loss. It’s also about Afghanistan. And I think that the most exciting kind of theatre is theatre that’s about lots and lots of different things and has a really broad perspective.

Goethe, who is a writer I revere, and Schiller, who is a younger German playwright who I also revere, have this great series of letters back and forth. They’re quoted by Brecht, who is, except for Shakespeare, simply one of the greatest playwrights that ever lived. Brecht quotes this wonderful thing from a letter that Goethe has written to Schiller about epic plays being played. In most plays, the audience sits in one place and the play moves, like a parade, along in front of them, and they’re captive in their seats. It’s Schiller, not Goethe—there’s an image he has for an epic play, that it’s something so big and large that the audience is actually, in some sense, up and wandering around amongst the characters. It’s not the play that’s moving; it’s the audience that’s moving in it. I think there’s something kind of lovely about that. Brecht uses an image from art history. Rather than the vanishing point perspective of the Italian Renaissance, where all the lines in the painting converge into one or two or three vanishing points on the horizon, but where the eye is guided to a certain point in the painting to look at, he loves the paintings of northern Europe from the sixteenth century, Breughel and Bosch, where you look and you don’t know. If you’ve seen a Breughel painting, this huge field of people wandering around, you have to find Jesus in the middle of all sorts of other things that are going on. The eye has to make the painting. It’s also something that Asian art frequently has; it doesn’t control the eye as much.

You do think about things like laughs. You have to make sure the play has them. I think it’s incredibly important. Because when an audience laughs, it collectivizes itself and it asserts its collective entity. If you want to know what theatre is, just look at the Theseus and Hippolyta speeches at the top of Act V in A Midsummer Night’s Dream. “All their minds transfigur’d so together,” everybody watching: Shakespeare’s manifesto. That’s why actors love doing theatre. That’s why people love writing for
Interview: Tony Kushner

it, love directing. To be in a relationship with that complicated thing out there is incredibly exciting.

**Audience Member:** Can you say anything about how you came to be a political activist, and which came first, your writing for the theatre or political activism?

**TPQ:** May I just say, too, that you might want to mention some of your activism. We were talking in the car on the way over here about how he has recently been to Gaza and shared work with Palestinian playwrights. I know you've been doing teach-ins with the left-leaning Jewish publication, *Tikkun*, about the Middle East and hopes for some sort of progress there.

**TK:** I grew up in a small town in Louisiana, but I came to Columbia College when I was seventeen in 1974. The very first week that I was there, we took over the Morningside Heights Library, because Abe Beam was trying to close down all the neighborhood branches of the library. So there was one on Columbia campus, and we occupied it. And it was news that something political was happening, because the sixties were over by then. All these old hippies and Weathermen and acid burnouts were amazing people. The Upper West Side was the greatest place on earth. So, it was all these old commies from the thirties and the Wobblies. Bela Abzug came and read us *Fahrenheit 451*. That was an enormous education for me. Jonathan Franzen, the guy who wrote *The Correction*, published a book of essays, and he talks about going with the ISO, International Socialist Organization, to Washington for the Bush “Hail to the Thief” inauguration [laughter] and protesting with these guys and then writing on it in the book. He says this beautiful sentence (I wish I had written it) about the bus ride home. He says, “There’s nothing more pleasurable than riding home after a demonstration, in the dark, with a group of people with whom you’re in violent agreement” [laughter]. It’s really thrilling.

Also, because I’m gay, when I came out, I tended to see things politically. Part of coming out was a political thing for me. I think it is for everybody. It was the beginning of ACT UP, one of the great moments of American political radicalism. I did a lot of actions with ACT UP. Some of it is really boring. Licking stamps and envelopes and making thousands of phone calls is dull. But going on a demonstration is an incredibly thrilling thing; even getting arrested can be exciting. There’s a degree of dissonance in your soul you’re not aware of until, I think, at a moment of actually being politically active; you are made aware of the dissonance by the fact that it’s not there anymore, because something that hasn’t been whole is suddenly whole.

As citizens of a democracy, when we are not agents, when we’re not people who make history as well as people who are made by history, something’s wrong inside of us. I think that when we act, even something as minor as voting (but it’s not enough to just do that), when we act as citizens, I think something inside comes together. If what you’re doing is malevolent, it expresses itself as a coming together as a kind of demonic force. But if you’re doing something progressive and good, it
feeds your soul, makes you into a better person, and makes you into a happier person. It’s also hard work and tiring.

My mother grew up in the Bronx during the thirties, a child of very poor, Jewish immigrants, and there’s the Jewish tradition that is incredibly important to me of political progress and political activism and also solidarity, which is another thing that socialism is all about. If one person is being treated unjustly, there is no justice anywhere. Those kinds of paradoxes are immediately recognizable from anybody who knows anything about Judaism. Also, I grew up in the Deep South, and I went to an Episcopal day school where we had *goy* classes every day [laughter]. I have read the New Testament many times. There is nothing more magnificent nor more unquestionably politically progressive and hair-raisingly radical than the Sermon on the Mount. If you just read that and follow that, you are of the left, and you are politically the preferential option. I mean, Christ came to the poor. I think there are all these things that move us to action. I’m doing an anthology right now of Jewish-American writers with a journalist from New York, who is also Jewish, about the situation in the Middle East. I’ve been licking envelopes; they’re all over the hotel room. We’re sending out letters asking different Jewish-American writers, who are Zionists or anti-Zionists but who are critical of the Sharon government, to contribute to an anthology to make it clear that the American Jewish community has not lost its tradition of complexity and dissent, and not all American Jews believe that Ariel Sharon is a legitimate leader, or that the treatment of Palestinian people is legal or accepted.

**Audience Member:** You mentioned that Bertolt Brecht was one of your influences and favorite playwrights. I was wondering how his ideas about epic theatre and distancing the audience and ideas about emotion have influenced your playwriting.

**TK:** When I was a student at Columbia, I wanted to be two things: I wanted to be politically active, and I also wanted to be in the theatre. And to do both, Brecht was the answer. Also, I was trying to read Marx at that point, and Brecht taught me how to understand Marx. And Marx taught me how to understand Brecht. You use the big problem word, “distancing” the audience. I don’t think that’s what Brecht was writing about. I think it’s the most misunderstood thing about Brecht. And what he called the *Verfremdungseffekt* is an effect of strangeness, not of distance. It’s not a lack of feeling. You can’t write *Mother Courage* and not expect to have people weeping in the audience. It’s the most moving play of the twentieth century. It’s devastating, excruciating. It’s as hard to watch, in its way, as *King Lear* is. In fact, Brecht’s last poem is, “If I say how things are, your heart will be torn to shreds. You’ll go down if you don’t stand up for yourself. Surely you see that.” That’s the whole poem. “Your heart will be torn to shreds.” He knew exactly what he was doing. He’s not about some weird pseudo-masochistic relationship with the audience, like, “I know you want to cry, but I’m going to spray vinegar in your face.” And people do the most bizarre, perverted things when they’re doing Brecht, because
they think that’s the job. But it’s not. There are the early learning plays, which are extremely strange, and fascinating, and great pieces of theatre, the ones he wrote before he went into exile. Those experimental plays have a very strange relationship to the audience, not primarily emotion, a kind of theatricalization of an intellectual process.

But the great plays, the ones that we talk about when we talk about Brecht, are plays that demand genius acting. The genius of his theory is, I think, fairly simple. It’s that when you look at an object on stage, it is both the thing that it seems to be, because you believe in it, and it isn’t that thing at all. It’s a fake thing on stage. And theatre never lets you forget that. It’s why it has a unique value. It’s why philosophers always turn to it as a model of human consciousness. You can’t look at theatre singly. You have to look at it doubly. You have to sort of look at it with blurred vision. The body that you’re seeing on stage (and the most famous example, of course, is at the end of *Hamlet*), all the dead bodies on stage, they’re all breathing. And if it’s been a great production of *Hamlet*, you’ll weep. It doesn’t make sense because you know that, of course, the actors are not dead, and yet you’re moved to tears. You’re made to look at the world critically.

I think that’s what Marx is talking about in a way in *Capital*, when he talks about the commodity form. The sinister sort of magic of capital is to create objects which seem to have always existed and have an independent existence and an independent value apart from the human labor that goes into them. But, actually, any object is the consequence of human labor, a product of human relationships and human energy. It just seems to be a thing apart from the human. But that’s a lie. Of course, it is also a thing apart from the human and you have to see them both at the same time. So, Brecht’s half curtain, people don’t always get what it’s supposed to do. The curtain is eight feet high and separates one scene from the other, and, in one of his poems about it, he says you’re supposed to be able to look on the other side of it and see the scene behind being prepared while the scene in front of it is being done. He has this great poem about it so that the audience could see that this is not magic, but work. With *Angels in America*, we had a big discussion about this for the film because they’re going to digitally remove the wires, but onstage, of course, you can’t do that. That’s why stage, in its way, is a radically different form. And people are always getting upset because they can see the wires. But the wire, of course, is the point. You know that some unfortunate actress’s back is going to be broken by the end of the run, being lowered in a harness. But if it’s a really great production of it, you have a feeling at the same time that you know that it’s not real, that you’re seeing something kind of supernatural and magical. And that doubleness—that’s the only way to get through life.

The great lie of Reaganism is that the world is commonsensical, that we all know the truth and we just sort of have to say it: “Damn it! It’s just plain wrong!” The minute anybody tells you that, they’re lying, because there’s no such thing as “just plain wrong.” And that’s not to be a relativist, because there are things that are wrong, but they’re never plain, and they’re never simple. You have to be able to see double or you are going to be a fool. The best thing to read is “The Short Organum
for the Theatre,” which was actually commissioned by an American critic, Eric Bentley.

I’ll leave you with this: Brecht wrote an essay, “The Short Organum for the Theatre.” I think it is simply the greatest theoretical piece of writing of anyone in the West, at least, on the art of theatre. If you read it and study it, you can, I think, come fairly close to understanding what he’s talking about.