

Angels, Reagan and AIDS in America

by Frank Rich

Tonight is the night when Americans might have tuned into Part 1 of “The Reagans” on CBS. But the joke is on the whiners who forced the mini-series off the air. Just three weeks from tonight, HBO will present the first three-hour installment of Mike Nichols’s film version of Tony Kushner’s “Angels in America,” starring Al Pacino and Meryl Streep. (Part 2 is a week later.) This epic is, among other things, a searing indictment of how the Reagan administration’s long silence stoked the plague of AIDS in the 1980’s. If “Angels” reaches an audience typical for HBO hits, it could detonate a debate bloody enough to make the fight over “The Reagans” look like an exhibition bout.

That’s not such a big if. “Angels” is the most powerful screen adaptation of a major American play since Elia Kazan’s “Streetcar Named Desire” more than a half-century ago. It’s been produced not only with stars but at four times the budget of “The Reagans.” People are going to talk about it, and, as they do, HBO will replay it relentlessly to rake in more and more of the country. Threats of a boycott against a channel soon to unveil a new season of “The Sopranos” will go nowhere.

“Angels” is only minutes old when Mr. Pacino appears as a real-life crony of the Reagans—Roy Cohn, in his post-McCarthy-era incarnation as a still-powerful Republican fixer, closely tied to the Ed Meese justice department. A photo on his office wall shows him arm in arm with both the president and his vice president. Cohn is also a closeted gay man dying of AIDS. When he takes a sexual partner to the White House, he gloats, “President Reagan smiles at us and shakes his hand.” Eventually Cohn will threaten to reveal “adorable Ollie North and his secret contra slush fund” unless the White House secures him a private stash of AZT, then the most promising AIDS drug and still unavailable to all but a few. Cohn gets his pills while thousands of other dying Americans are placed on hold.

How much of this really happened and how much is fantasy? Mr. Kushner is not making a historical documentary, or practicing journalism, any more than those behind “The Reagans” were. Whatever his script’s fictions, it accurately conveys the rancid hypocrisy among powerful closeted gay Republicans in Washington as AIDS spiraled. And though “Angels” takes note of the falling of the Berlin Wall, it doesn’t feel that it owes a president any sanctuary from free speech. “If he didn’t have people like me to demonize,” says one angry non-Republican gay character, Reagan would have ended up the “upper-right-hand square on ‘The Hollywood Squares.’” The Reagans are “not really a family,” goes another riff. “There aren’t any connections there, no love.”

There is much, much more to “Angels” than politics, which is why it is so gripping. Were it a didactic ideological piece, it would be deadly. But Mr. Kushner’s story is built on characters, gay and straight alike, who fight timeless battles over love and betrayal even as they struggle with the meaning of faith, family and America itself at an apocalyptic moment in the life of their nation. In the nearly dozen years since the play’s premiere, its captivating interweaving of fever dreams with domestic drama, of humor with death, has become a calling card for adventurous TV, including HBO’s “Six Feet Under” and “Carnivàle” as well as “The Sopranos.” And if anything, Mr. Kushner’s writing has gained in pathos with age. What he has to say about coping with unfathomable loss and the terror inflicted by covert, death-dealing cells at the end of the last millennium speaks to us more urgently than ever in the new one ushered in by 9/11. If you blink, you may miss the World Trade Center when it peeks out of the clouds in the background of a shot, but its shadow is always there, hovering in the film’s vivid downtown New York, roiling the viewer’s heart.

Because “Angels” will reach a far larger audience through TV than any play does in the theater, it will instantly cast the curious argument over CBS’s “Reagans” in another light. If there was one consistent theme to 90 percent of the outrage over a mini-series that no one outside CBS (including me) has seen, it was focused on a single line about AIDS attributed to Ronald Reagan: “They that live in sin shall die in sin.” The screenwriter of “The Reagans” admitted to *The New York Times* that she had no source for the line and it was cut. Yet even after it was cut, those on the attack kept harping on it more than any other element in the unseen film. Why?

It was the syndrome of protesting too much, methinks. There’s no evidence to suggest that Reagan was a bigot, but even so, he did say things similar to that jettisoned sentence. Edmund Morris, who wrote “Dutch,” the Reagan biography both solicited and authorized by the former president’s inner circle, quoted him as saying, “Maybe the Lord brought down this plague” because “illicit sex is against the Ten Commandments.” But what’s more important in any event is what Reagan didn’t say—and didn’t do—when AIDS happened on his watch.

As Lou Cannon, the most respected of Reagan biographers, wrote in his authoritative “President Reagan,” “Reagan’s response to this epidemic was halting and ineffective.” The president mentioned to his own doctor that he thought AIDS was as transitory as measles. Mr. Cannon’s bald accounting of the net results of this inactivity speaks for itself: “There were only 199 reported cases of AIDS in 1981. Eight years later more than 55,000 persons had died from this new scourge, exceeding the total of U.S. combat deaths in either the Vietnam War or the Korean War.”

Dr. Everett Koop, the frustrated surgeon general who tried to enlist Reagan in the AIDS battle late in his second term, gave a speech to a Kaiser Family Foundation symposium in 2001 explaining what went on in the White House during the 80’s. In Dr. Koop’s account, he was kept out of all AIDS discussions for the administration’s first five years, while “the advisers to the president took the stand” that homosexuals and intravenous drug users were “only getting what they justly deserve.” In Mr. Cannon’s biography, anti-Koop forces within the administration are identified as William Bennett, Gary Bauer and Patrick Buchanan—all of whom, uncoincidentally enough, were vociferous in the assault on “The Reagans.”

In his attempt to use the debate over a TV movie to rewrite that history, Mr. Bauer went so far as to suggest that Reagan galvanized the bureaucracy to take on AIDS—a statement so ludicrous you have to wonder if Reagan himself would find it a reach. In truth, Reagan’s actual record on AIDS may be worse than “The Reagans” purported it to be. Jon Stewart, as always, could be counted on to crystallize that point when discussing the fictional “live in sin” line last week on “The Daily Show.” “As critics point out, Reagan never said anything like that,” Mr. Stewart said. “In fact he didn’t even mention the word AIDS in public until seven years into his presidency. So you can see why people are upset: CBS made someone totally indifferent look callous.”

The farcical hypocrisies of the debate over “The Reagans” don’t end there. In trying to explain why he caved on the show at the last minute—there was a full-page ad for it in *People* as recently as last week—Les Moonves of CBS has taken to referring to his network as a “public trust.” If you want to see the reverence with which that trust is honored, don’t miss CBS on Wednesday, when it broadcasts the latest installment of “The Victoria’s Secret Fashion Show.” No less ridiculous were two of Mr. Moonves’s loudest critics, Patti Davis and Michael Reagan, both of whom got big paydays for tell-all books trashing Ronald and Nancy Reagan far more ferociously than anything reported to be in the CBS mini-series. In “The Way I See It,” published in 1992, Ms. Davis presented her mother as a pill-popping tyrant who slapped her around for years for such sins as refusing to urinate on demand.

Some rationalizers of the do-little Reagan record on AIDS have gone so far as to mount a “some of his best friends were closeted homosexuals” defense. One right-wing

Web site, NewsMax.com, trumpeted a letter from Rock Hudson's lover, Marc Christian, describing a phone call Reagan placed to the star when he was dying of AIDS in 1985. But in Reagan's public statement saluting his Hollywood friend after he had died, he never mentioned AIDS. As Lou Cannon writes, the president actually cut AIDS funds a few months after Hudson's death and didn't pay more than lip service to the topic until a speech in May 1987; even then, a mention of Ryan White, the heroic young hemophiliac AIDS victim, was stripped from the speech in the White House drafting process. It's true that the Reagans had gay friends—Roy Cohn prominently among them—but, as "Angels in America" reminds us, those friends were more terrified of being forced out of the closet than of AIDS. In one of Mr. Kushner's most harrowing scenes, we see Mr. Pacino's Cohn rip himself off his hospital-room IV, spouting geysers of blood, to try to browbeat a gay Republican lawyer (Patrick Wilson, in a career-making performance) into going back to his wife.

The zeal with which the likes of Gary Bauer and the Rev. Jerry Falwell, among others, have suddenly taken to championing the Reagan record on AIDS may have less to do with Ronald Reagan than with trying to bury their own records back then. Not that they've changed much since. It's because of their continued efforts—and those of other political operatives like them—that even the current administration's admirable AIDS initiative in Africa is hindered by restrictions that give a higher priority to abstinence than safe sex as a form of HIV prevention. Science is politicized in the Bush White House, as it was in Reagan's, to the point where AIDS researchers have complained that terms like "gay" and "anal sex" must be omitted from their grant applications to the National Institutes of Health, lest they prompt the administration to shut them down. The same family-values pressure groups have also lobbied the White House to throw up roadblocks for embryonic stem-cell research, a possible cure for other diseases.

"A lot of time is being wasted," said Nancy Reagan when she signaled her opposition to the Bush administration's stand on stem cells to *The Times* last fall. "A lot of people who could be helped are not being helped." One of those people, of course, is her husband; Alzheimer's is thought likely to be alleviated by stem-cell therapy.

When Gary Bauer and his peers expressed horror that CBS would broadcast "The Reagans" while Ronald Reagan is dying of Alzheimer's, they seemed oblivious to the reality that they had helped scuttle some of the scientific research that might have helped their idol. When they complained that it is unfair to revisit the Reagan story when Reagan can no longer speak in his own defense, they ignored the tens of thousands of casualties from that time who also have no voice. On screen, "Angels in America" speaks for those silenced thousands far more eloquently than any of those defending the Reagan record on AIDS has yet spoken for the former president. Mr. Kushner and Mr. Pacino even make you feel a certain human sympathy for Roy Cohn.

I can't say I expected to find "Angels in America" this affecting in 2003. Plays you love don't always hold up years later, particularly those tied in any way to headlines. Great plays almost never make good films. But even when Mr. Nichols's version lags—as it does at times in the second half, in part because the female characters are not as deeply acted as the men—any failings pale next to the grandeur of the larger achievement. This is a work big enough to walk around in again and again, and ravishing to watch even when its heavenly interludes threaten to go over the top. It hasn't dated a whit. When Mr. Kushner, in anticipation of the millennium, wrote the line, "History is about to crack wide open," he saw around a corner the rest of us could not. And what he found there is more important than ever: not just terror, but a possibility of hope in which love, God and a bedrock belief in the American ideal of justice all come into play. At one point Belize (Jeffrey Wright), Cohn's black gay nurse, complains that the "white cracker who wrote the national anthem" set the word "free" to "a note so high nobody could reach it." But Mr. Kushner does reach it here, and it is piercing.

As onstage, "Angels" ends on a bright winter's day in 1990, as old friends gather by

the fountain in Central Park harboring a statue of the Bethesda Angel. “This disease will be the end of many of us, but not nearly all,” says Prior Walter (Justin Kirk), a young man who discovers his first lesion of Kaposi’s sarcoma at the start of the drama but is still alive at the end. “We are not going away,” he says. “We won’t die secret deaths anymore. The world only spins forward.”

And so it has. Neither CBS nor those who intimidated it can suppress the story of just what happened in America in the 1980’s, a time when too many died in secret and too many of those who might have helped looked away.