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Angels in Performance

Playwright and screenwriter Tony Kushner will speak on campus.



Director David Crespy works with the cast of MU's production of Tony Kushner's Pulitzer Prize-winning play *Angels in America*. Crespy, an MU theater professor, will do an on-stage interview with Kushner in the Rhynsburger Theatre April 24 at 5 p.m. Photo by Nicholas Benner.

Story by Kelsey Allen

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When director David Crespy sets the scene for the MU production of *Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes*, his voice catches.

“The entire setting of the play is in the New York of the 1980s, which was a graffiti-covered, gritty, tough, suffering New York in the middle of a plague,” says Crespy, referring to the AIDS epidemic. “Imagine you’re just out of college about to start your life, and you’re informed that you’re infected with a virus that there is no cure for, that the death from which will be horrible. There is no escape.”

That’s the world Tony Kushner lived in when he wrote the Pulitzer Prize-winning drama, and that’s the world Crespy lived in when he lost his father to the disease.

For reasons both professional and personal, *Angels in America* has been on the theater professor’s list of plays to direct for a while, but the timing has always been off.

Then in early 2013, Crespy published a book about Richard Barr, a gay producer, with a foreword and afterward by openly gay playwright Edward Albee, and with Robert Schanke, a leading scholar on LGBTQ theater history, as his editor. Then MU Libraries announced a legacy gift of more than 45 boxes of papers and manuscripts by Lanford Wilson, Missouri’s own Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright who

was also gay.

The timing felt right.

Angels in America

The MU Department of Theatre and MU Libraries are co-sponsoring an interdisciplinary conference about documenting the lives of the LGBTQ community through theater and performance, featuring a Q-and-A with Kushner in the Rhynsburger Theatre April 24 at 5 p.m., workshops and presentations by scholars in the field and the theatre department's production of *Angels in America*.

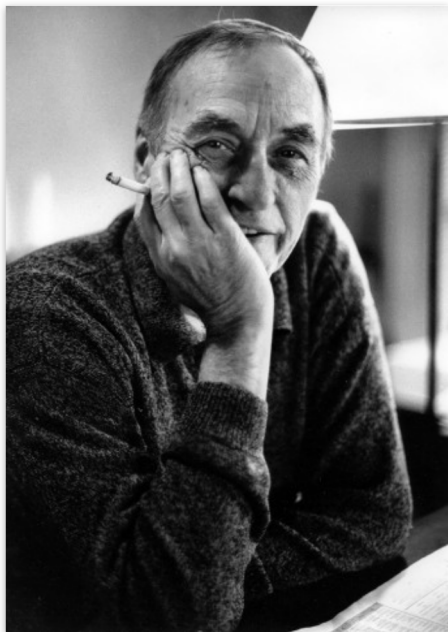
“Kushner has just come off a project writing about one of the greatest Americans in history and the notion of tolerance and fighting for rights,” says Crespy, referencing Kushner’s screenplay for the 2012 film *Lincoln*. “That’s what *Angels in America* is about. It’s about tolerance, compassion and hope. And not just tolerance but actually celebrating gay lives.”

The play explores the lives of eight characters, gay and straight, and their struggles with love, loss, greed and bigotry. At the heart of the play is the idea of leaving behind someone who is sick and fragile, which Crespy calls a metaphor for what America did to those suffering during the AIDS crisis when Kushner wrote the play.

“It’s been 20 years since the initial production, but

there is still a need for angels in America,” Crespy says. “I hope people who walk into the theater uncomfortable with gay issues walk away feeling different because what they’re watching is just two human beings who are wrestling with incredible suffering and loss. I hope that people walk away from it transformed by the humanity of it. That’s the magic of theater.”

The seven-hour epic is split into two separately presentable parts. Part one, *Millennium Approaches*, will be in full production at the Rhynsburger Theatre April 25–27 at 7:30 p.m. A free concert performance of part two, *Perestroika*, will be performed at the Rhynsburger Theatre April 28 at 2 p.m.



MU Libraries received the papers and manuscripts of Lanford Wilson, one of the premier American playwrights of the last half of the 20th century. Photo courtesy of MU Libraries Special Collections.

Lanford Wilson Collection

The reception to celebrate the bequest of Lanford Wilson’s papers will be in Bingham Gallery April 24 at 6 p.m. Kushner and Crespy will speak, and special guests Marshall Mason, co-founder and former artistic director of the Circle Repertory Company, as well as Wilson’s major director and artistic partner, and Danny Irvine, a Circle Repertory performer, will be in attendance.

Wilson was born in 1937 in

Missouri, and although he never attended Mizzou, his 1980 Pulitzer Prize-winning play *Talley's Folly*, the second in the *Talley Trilogy*, deals with family relationships in small-town Missouri.

Not only a pioneer in the Off-Off Broadway movement, Wilson was also one of the first playwrights to write openly gay characters, starting with his one-act play *The Madness of Lady Bright* in 1964. In 1969, he co-founded the Circle Repertory Company where he would go on to write and debut his most critically acclaimed works. At his death in 2011, he was known as one of the premier American playwrights of the last half of the 20th century.

“[The collection is] a treasure trove of personal effects from somebody who had been at the heart of the theater movement from the 1940s–90s,” says Jim Cogswell, director of libraries.

Ellis Library's main colonnade displays a snapshot of the collection: a few posters and playbills, photographs from Wilson's days in New York, and the beginnings of scripts.

“There is a typewritten manuscript in the exhibit that has a big red handwritten scribble that says, ‘Rewrite,’” Cogswell says. “Maybe there is another piece of paper in the collection that shows what he rewrote? You see the evolution. You see the growth. You see the way he grew as a human being and as an artist.

“This will be seen as a work of growing significance. This is the stuff of scholarship.”

Crespy has already started wading through collection. He plans to direct *Fifth of July*, the third in the *Talley Trilogy*, in the fall.

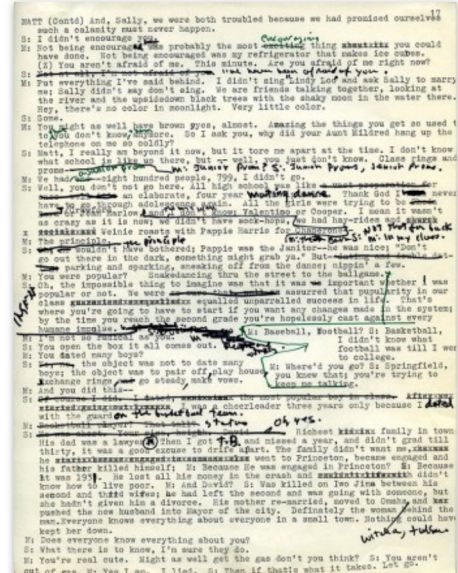
“Flipping through his original notebooks, the characters of the Talley family of Lebanon, Mo., start to unfold in his own handwriting in front of your face,” Crespy says.

“You can watch the playwright making decisions about which characters stay, which characters leave, which lines are included. There are at least 10 dissertations that can come out of this and several books. It’s the kind of collection that normally you have to go to New York City’s Billy Rose Theatre Division at the New York Public Library to access.”

Topics: Arts and Humanities, Community, History, News, Web

Exclusives

Tags: Faculty



The collection that Wilson left to the MU Libraries includes a first draft of *Talley's Folly*, his 1979 one-act play that takes place on a Missouri Farm. Photo courtesy of MU Libraries Special Collections.

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