



WRESTLING WITH ANGELS: PLAYWRIGHT TONY KUSHNER

A Film by Academy Award Winner
Freida Lee Mock

World Premiere Sundance 2006

35mm/ Dolby SR
Running Time – 98 minutes
The film is unrated

Distributed by Balcony Releasing

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“Fiercely political, deeply personal, incredibly intelligent, funny, poignant, hopeful, and immensely spiritual, Kushner’s work is a bright shining light.”

David Courier, Sundance 2006

SYNOPSIS

Wrestling With Angels: Playwright Tony Kushner is a feature documentary film about the Pulitzer and Tony Award-winning playwright Tony Kushner (*Angels in America*, *Caroline or Change*, *Homebody/Kabul*, *Munich*). It tells the story of a relentlessly creative spirit at work and of how Kushner, raised in the Deep South, would become an outspoken activist, a compassionate spokesperson for outsiders, and one of America’s most important playwrights. At its core the film explores the mystery of creativity, its sources and Kushner’s compelling plays that are set against the moral and political concerns of our times. While it focuses on Kushner as an artist and activist, the film also captures the poignant story of a father and son relationship. Finally, it is the inspiring tale of how a passionately committed person can make a difference for social justice.

Wrestling With Angels: Playwright Tony Kushner takes place against the backdrop of three tumultuous years in America, from September 11, 2001 to the 2004 Presidential election. The film features acclaimed theater and movie actors in unforgettable, entertaining scenes from Kushner’s new work – Marcia Gay Harden, as Laura Bush, emoting in a gut-wrenchingly comic manner in *Only We Who Guard the Mystery Shall Be Unhappy*; Meryl Streep pleading to God in a moving reading of Kushner’s *Prayer on AIDS*; and Emma Thompson crashing through the ceiling as the prophetic angel in *Angels in America*.

The film is structured around three acts that encapsulate the broad themes of Kushner’s work. **Act I - *As a Citizen of the World*** displays Kushner’s concern with global issues. In riveting scenes from his one act play where Marcia Gay Harden reads to dead Iraqi children and from his play on Afghanistan, *Homebody/Kabul*, Kushner explores our global responsibility in an age of terrorism. **Act II – *Mama, I’m a Homosexual Mama*** dramatizes Kushner’s concern with national issues focusing on the AIDS crisis and gay rights through his personal story of “coming out;” through insight into the creative arc of his celebrated epic play *Angels in America*; and with his candid and humorous talk about Gay Pride at JP Morgan Chase. **Act III - *Collective Action to Overcome Injustice*** reveals the influence of Kushner’s Jewish heritage in his passionate concern for social justice, expressed in deeply personal terms. Moving scenes from his play on Jewish immigration, *Why Should It Be Easy When It Can Be Hard*; from the children’s holocaust opera *Brundibar*; and from the musical *Caroline, or Change* -- all express Kushner’s belief in collective action to overcome injustice, especially as it concerns women and children.

At heart **Wrestling With Angels: Playwright Tony Kushner** explores Tony Kushner’s relentless struggle to find creative expression for deep and fundamental truths, and through the power and intimacy of live theater, vivid characters and rich dialogue, to provide a national dialogue on some of our most pressing concerns -- war, race, class, the AIDS pandemic, gay and lesbian rights, genocide and our global responsibility in the Middle East. This film is a testament to the power of an artist and activist to provoke and inspire the best in all of us.

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Film Credits

<p><u>Opening Titles</u></p> <p>American Film Foundation Presents</p> <p>A Film by Freida Lee Mock</p> <p>WRESTLING WITH ANGELS: Playwright Tony Kushner</p> <p><u>Closing Titles</u></p> <p>Director, Writer, Producer Freida Lee Mock</p> <p>Cinematographers Bestor Cram Don Lenzer Eddie Marritz Chris Paul Terry Sanders</p> <p>Editor Anne Stein</p> <p>Composer Jeanine Tesori</p> <p>Executive Producer Terry Sanders</p> <p>Sound Recordists</p> <p>Ben Avishai Ted Gesing Jon Haptas Dan MacIntosh Mark Mandler Jo Jo Pennebaker Jerry Stein</p>	<p>Assistant Camera</p> <p>Michael Denhi Keith Pokorski Jerry Risius Ross Sebek Peter Stepanek</p> <p>Associate Producer/ Designer Brittany Sanders</p> <p>Post Production Foto Kem EFilm A1 Film & Video Christopher Gray Post Productions RocketWerks</p> <p>Re-recording Mixer Mercury Sound Studios John Brasher</p> <p>Major funding provided by</p> <p>National Endowment for the Arts Helen and Peter Bing Morgan B. Lee</p> <p>A Production of American Film Foundation Sanders & Mock Productions</p> <p>Copyright 2006 American Film Foundation/ Sanders & Mock Productions</p> <p>RT – 98 Minutes/ 35 mm/ Dolby SR</p>

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The Director's Statement

I first became interested in Tony Kushner after hearing him deliver an amazing, inspiring one minute speech.

In the early 1990's I had heard about a provocative, long new play called *Angels in America*, but unlike many who saw it in its gestation in San Francisco, Los Angeles, London or in its Broadway run in 1993, I did not see *Angels* nor had I read or seen any of Kushner's plays when I started this film in the fall of 2001.

I had, however, read a short essay Tony had written called *With a Little Help From My Friends* from his book *Thinking About the Longstanding Problems of Virtue and Happiness*. In this essay Tony expressed his heartfelt thanks to all the people who had helped him become the playwright he is, especially following the acclaim of *Angels in America*. I found the essay funny, generous, openhearted, politically astute, surprising and I said to myself, "Who is this person? No one thinks this way. Schadenfreude rules." I loved the spirit of his ideas and the personality behind the writing.

Shortly afterwards I heard Tony speak at a college graduation. He was told he could speak but for one minute. His speech was hilarious and serious, highly political, a tour de force that surprised and inspired us about the possibilities of a better world. In the four years of directing this film about Tony as an artist and activist, I find this typical of his impact on audiences.

His speech and essay stayed with me. Right after September 11, I ran across an article in the LA Times that described the opening of a new Kushner play off-Broadway, *Homebody/Kabul*, his first since writing *Angels*. The subject of his play Afghanistan, a place I knew, immediately sparked my interest in doing a film about Kushner and his work as a playwright and activist.

A leap of faith about the film propelled me over the next three years as I filmed and essentially "stalked" Tony all over the country - Chicago, Berkeley, Miami, Los Angeles, Texas, Louisiana, New York, Boston, Providence - wherever his plays and public engagements with high school, college, and local communities took him.

I was particularly drawn to Tony's interest in writing, often with blistering humor and seriousness, about some of the major social and political issues of our time; issues such as war, race, class, the AIDS pandemic, gay and lesbian rights, genocide, and the war on terrorism. And I was interested in exploring the influential forces of creativity and how Kushner grapples with large themes and is able to transform an audience through the unique intimacy of theater.

These years have been immensely active for Kushner with the production of new plays, books, master classes and community work. These projects and activities are the building-blocks through which the movie's audience, I hope, will come to understand not only Kushner's artistry, but the creative process in general, the power of theater to engage and move us, and the difference one person and artist can make in inspiring us to be actively involved with the moral and political issues of our times.

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Major Cast

Tony Kushner

Tony Kushner was born in Manhattan. At the age of two his parents, both professional musicians, moved to Lake Charles, Louisiana where his father took charge of the family business, the Kushner Lumber Company while continuing to work as a clarinetist. At 18 his mother was the first bassoonist for the New York City Opera. His parents introduced Tony to music, poetry and the evils of McCarthyism. Tony dates his interest in the theater to early memories of seeing his mother onstage in local plays. He also recalls from childhood ‘fairly clear memories of being gay since I was six.’ He did not, however, ‘come out’ until after he tried psychotherapy at age 20 in an attempt to change his sexual orientation. Kushner grew up during the civil rights era, attending an integrated high school. He studied medieval history at Columbia and received a Masters in theater directing from NYU.

Kushner’s first play, *A Bright Room Called Day*, is set in the Weimar Republic right before the rise of Hitler. He wrote the play as a parable about what he saw developing in the U.S. with the election of Reagan as President in 1980. His plays include *Hydriotaphia, or the Death of Dr. Browne*; *Angels in America, Parts One and Two*; *Slavs!*; *Homebody/Kabul*; and *Caroline, or Change*. His series of five short plays include *East Coast Ode to Howard Jarvis* and *G. David Schine in Hell*.

His adaptations include Corneille’s *The Illusion*; Ansky’s *The Dybbuk*; Brecht’s *The Good Person of Szechuan*; Goethe’s *Stella*; and the English-language libretti for two operas: Krasa’s *Brundibar* and Martinu’s *Comedy on the Bridge*.

His books include *Brundibar*, a picture book for children illustrated by Maurice Sendak; *The Art of Maurice Sendak, 1980-The Present*; *Thinking about the Long Standing Problems of Virtue and Happiness*; and *Wrestling With Zion: Progressive Jewish-American response to the Israel-Palestinian Conflict*, co-edited with Alisa Solomon.

Kushner wrote the screenplay adaptation of *Angels of America* for the six-hour Emmy Award-winning movie of the same title and wrote the screenplay *Munich* for Steven Spielberg.

Besides the Pulitzer, Kushner has received numerous awards including the Spirit of Justice Award from the Gay and Lesbian Advocates and Defenders (GLAAD), the Award of Courage from AMFAR, committed to eradicating AIDS, and a Cultural Achievement Award from the National Foundation for Jewish Culture.

Marcia Gay Harden

The Academy Award-winning actress appears as Harper Pitt in Kushner’s original Broadway play *Angels in America* and gives a hilarious portrayal as Laura Bush in Kushner’s newest work – in - progress *Only We Who Guard the Mystery Shall be Unhappy*, a title taken from Dostoevsky’s *Brother’s Karamazov*.

Meryl Streep

The Academy Award-winning actress appears as Joe Pitt’s mother Hannah in the movie version of Kushner’s *Angels in America* and at an AMFAR event where Streep gives a moving reading of Kushner’s *Prayer on AIDS* written ten years earlier, reflecting its relevancy now as then to the AIDS pandemic.

Emma Thompson

The Academy Award-winning actress appears as the Angel in the movie *Angels in America* delivering a message to the Aids-stricken Prior Walter.

Mike Nichols

The Academy Award winner directs a stellar cast of actors in the HBO movie version of *Angels in America* and worked closely with Kushner in adapting the play to the screen.

Linda Emond

The acclaimed stage actress gives an astonishing performance as the dysfunctional British housewife who seeks adventure in Afghanistan in Kushner's newest drama *Hombody/Kabul*, including a 50-minute opening monologue. In the play Kushner raises questions about our responsibility in an era of global terrorism.

George C. Wolfe

A Tony Award-winning director, Wolfe's Broadway plays include *Caroline, or Change*, *Topdog/Underdog*, *Elaine Stritch: At Liberty*, *The Tempest*, *Angels in America*, *Millennium Approaches* and *Perestroika*. He recently directed the movie *Lackawanna Blues* and has been the producer at the Public Theater since 1993. He wrote *The Colored Museum*, *Jelly's Last Jam* and the *Wild Party*. George Wolfe was named a "Living Landmark" by the New York Landmarks Conservancy.

Tonya Pinkins

The Tony Award-winning actress (*Jelly's Last Jam*) plays Caroline Thibodeaux, a black maid working for a Southern Jewish family in the musical *Caroline, or Change*, Kushner's most autobiographical play. The story focuses on her relationship with 8-year-old Noah Gellman whose mother has died of cancer. In this family drama set in the civil rights era in the 60's, Kushner explores issues of race and class.

Harrison Chad

The Broadway child actor, who plays 8 year old Noah Gellman in the musical *Caroline, or Change*, has appeared in *Les Misrables*, *Beauty and the Beast* and *Peter Pan*, and such movies as *Charlotte's Web* and *Tarzan II*.

Anika Noni Rose

The Tony Award winning actress plays Emmie Thibodeaux, Caroline's strong-willed daughter in the musical *Caroline, or Change*. Emmie embraces the changes taking place in the South during the civil rights era and sings about a brighter future for herself, compared to that of her mother's.

Maurice Sendak

The acclaimed illustrator and writer of *Where the Wild Things Are*, *the Night Kitchen*, *Outside Over There* and dozens of acclaimed books for children and adults, Sendak collaborated with Kushner on the opera and children's book *Brundibar* and is the subject of a major book by Kushner, *The Art of Maurice Sendak, 1980 to the present*.

Oskar Eustis

Theater director and Artistic Director of the Public Theater today, Oskar Eustis while at San Francisco's Eureka Theater commissioned Kushner to write a play of his choosing which became the seven-hour epic *Angels in America, A Gay Fantasia on National Themes*. As a close friend and dramaturg, Eustis and Kushner continue to collaborate.

Ela Weisberger

Ela is one of only 100 out of 15, 000 children who survived the holocaust at the Czech Theresiensdat concentration camp. At age twelve Ela played the role of the cat 55 times in the children's opera *Brundibar* performed at the camp, and appeared in the Nazi propaganda film *The Fuhrer Gives the Jews a City* about this 'model' camp. Today Ela lives in New York and regularly speaks to children when the opera *Brundibar* is performed.

Jeanine Tesori

The award-winning composer wrote the score for *Thoroughly Modern Millie, Twelfth Night, and Violet*. For four years Tesori collaborated with Kushner and George C. Wolfe on the musical *Caroline, or Change*. She also performed and was the musical director at Kushner's wedding to Mark. She is writing the Broadway musical *Shrek*.

Cameo Appearances

In Angels in America

Jeffrey Wright as Belize and Mr. Lieds in the HBO movie

Mary Louise Parker as the pill-popping wife Harper Pitt in the HBO movie

Justin Kirk as Prior in the HBO movie

Ben Shenkman as Louis in the HBO movie

Ron Leibman as Roy Cohn in the Broadway play

Joe Mantello as Louis in the Broadway play

Stephen Spinella, the Tony winner as Prior Walter in the Broadway play

Ellen McLaughlin as the Angel, a role she originated and as the Polish countess in Kushner's *It's an Undoing World*

Kathleen Chalfant appears as the Mormon mother Hannah Pitt and the doctor in the Broadway play and as Grandma Sara in *It's an Undoing World*

In It's an Undoing World or Why Should It be Easy When it Can be Hard? a play about Jewish immigration and breast cancer

Swoozie Kurtz plays the middle daughter, Tony's Aunt Martha who has breast cancer

Marian Seldes plays the eldest daughter, Tony's Aunt Lucy who died from breast cancer

Maria Tucci plays the youngest daughter, Tony's mother Sylvia who died from breast cancer

Wendy Wasserstein, the acclaimed playwright, plays the solemn grandchild

Alice Playten, who made her Broadway debut as Baby Louise in *Gypsy*, plays the Voice of the Teapot and also plays Grandma Gellman in *Caroline, or Change*.

Naomi Goldberg, the choreographer and dancer, inspired this play by Kushner

Alicia Svigals, composer, violinist and musical director, considered to be the world's leading klezmer fiddler, founded the **Klezmatiks**, the Jewish roots band and her current group the all-female **Mikveh**.

In the play **Homebody/Kabul**

Dylan Baker, distinctive in the film *Happiness* and on Broadway and off-Broadway, plays the husband Milton Ceiling who goes to Afghanistan with his daughter Priscilla to find his wife the Homebody.

Bill Camp plays Quango Twistleton, the lonely aid worker for the British government in Kabul.

Rita Wolf plays Mahala, the highly educated librarian distraught over the Taliban.

Firdous Bamji plays the Taliban minister Mullah Aftar Durrani.

Kelly Hutchison plays Priscilla, the unemployed, adrift daughter of the Homebody.

In the musical **Caroline, or Change**

Veanne Cox plays the stepmother of Noah, Rose Gellman.

Capathia Jenkins plays the role of the washing machine

Marva Hicks, Ramona Keller and **Tracy Nicole Chapman** play the roles of the radio

Alice Playten, plays Noah's grandmother Gellman

Additional Cameo Appearances

Frank Rich, the New York Times writer and former drama critic

Larry Kramer, the playwright (*Normal Heart*) and founder of Act Up

Terrence McNally, playwright (*Master Class*)

Paul Rudnick, playwright

Anne Scurria, a long-time member of the Trinity Repertory Company, plays the Angel in the Laura Bush play *Only We Who Guard the Mystery Shall be Unhappy*

Michael McElroy, acclaimed Broadway actor (*Big River, Rent, The Who's Tommy*), is the featured soloist at Tony and Mark's wedding and sings "*I Only Have Eyes for You.*"

William Kushner, Tony's father, received his masters in the clarinet at Julliard and has been the long-time conductor of the Lake Charles Symphony Orchestra. Today he is the third generation family head of the Kushner Lumber Company, along with the Berard family in Louisiana.

Plays by Tony Kushner

A Bright Room Called Day, 1987

Hydriotaphia, 1987

Yes Yes No No, 1987

The Illusion, 1988 adaptation of Corneille

Angels in America, Part One, 1991

Angels in America, Part Two, 1992

Slavs!, 1994

Dybbuk, 1995

Notes on Akiba, 1995

It's An Undoing World, 1995

Only We Who Guard the Mystery Shall be Unhappy (2003, work in progress)

East Code Ode to Howard Jarvis, 1996

G. David Schine, 1996

Terminating, 1998

Homebody/Kabul 2001

Caroline, or Change 2003

Good Person of Szechuan, adaptation of Brecht

Stella, adaptation of Goethe

Opera Brundibar, adaptation of Krasa

Opera Comedy on the the Bridge, adaptation

Henry Box Brown (in progress)

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The Production Team

Director, Writer, Producer – Freida Lee Mock

Mock is an Academy and Emmy Award winning-filmmaker who received the Oscar for the feature documentary *Maya Lin: A Strong Clear Vision*, about the designer of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial and the Civil Rights Memorial. She followed this with the feature documentary *Return With Honor*, about American fighter pilots surviving as POWs in North Vietnam for almost 9 years. The film was presented theatrically by Tom Hanks and Playtone after its Sundance premiere. She has been nominated for an Oscar for the short documentaries *Sing*; *Rose Kennedy: A Life to Remember*; *Never Give Up*, the story of the holocaust survivor Dr. Herbert Zipper; and *To Live or Let Die*, about a day in the life in a neonatal intensive care unit that raises ethical questions about life and death. Mock's film projects have been supported by grants from NEA, CPB, AFI, Women in Film, NAATA, and family foundations. She graduated in history from UC Berkeley and attended UC Berkeley's Hastings College of Law.

Directors of Photography – Eddie Marritz, Don Lenzer, Bestor Cram, Terry Sanders

Eddie Marritz and Don Lenzer are two of the most distinguished cinema verite cinematographers who have worked with Mock on numerous films including *Maya Lin* and *Return With Honor* and both have photographed numbers of Academy Award-winning films.

Bestor Cram founded Northern Lights Production in Boston, a full service production company through which Bestor produces, directs and photographs outstanding documentaries. While at Sundance, Cram won a Mercedes in a drawing for directors in competition.

Editor – Anne Stein

Stein works in studio and independent films. **Wrestling With Angels: Playwright Tony Kushner** is her third collaboration with Mock who previously worked with Stein on *SING!* and *Bird by Bird With Annie*. Stein was the editor of *Love Liza* with Philip Seymour Hoffman and Kathy Bates which premiered at Sundance. Prior to that she worked with Terrence Malick on *The Thin Red Line*.

Composer – Jeanine Tesori

Tesori wrote the score for *Thoroughly Modern Millie*, *Twelfth Night*, *Violet*, songs for *Mulan II* and *Lilo and Stitch II*. She has been nominated for a Tony and a Grammy and received an Obie Award, a Drama Desk Award, and a Best Musical by the NY Drama Critics Circle and the Lucille Lortel Awards. She is now writing the Broadway musical *Shrek*.

Executive Producer – Terry Sanders

Sanders is a two-time Oscar winner for the classic short dramatic film *A Time Out of War* and for *Maya Lin: A Strong Clear Vision*. He is developing the movie *Tokyo Rose* and in production on *Fighting for Life*, a feature documentary about medical warriors and military medicine, focusing on Iraq/Afghanistan.

The Production Company – American Film Foundation/ Sanders & Mock Productions

This Santa Monica-based production company has produced Academy and Emmy Award-winning films that range from feature films, feature documentaries to television specials and series.