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### Dim Bulbs, Better Angels

Our take on four wildly varying new productions about tulips, ghosts, AIDS and hateful people.

City Paper

[ theater reviews ]

“A gay fantasia on national themes” is the subtitle Tony Kushner gave his two-part magnum opus, *Angels in America* — and formidable as that sounds, it only begins to capture its grandeur and power. To see *Angels* anywhere is an opportunity for celebration; to see it here, in Blanka Zizka’s magnificent staging, is a not-to-be-missed experience.

Many recent plays feel hyperextended at 90 minutes. *Angels*, which in full runs nearly seven hours, has a feel of gaining momentum. The first three-plus hours, *Millennium Approaches*, are now on stage at the Wilma; in September, the second part, *Perestroika*, will open the Wilma’s next season.

It’s been just over 20 years since *Millennium*’s premiere in 1991, only a few years removed from the play’s setting in mid-’80s New York. The subject, in large part the devastating effect of AIDS on individuals and our country, was part of the living present. In the two decades since, greatly improved medical care and often a much-happier prognosis have softened the sense of inevitable catastrophe of an HIV diagnosis in America. Yet the brilliance of Kushner’s work — so palpably fueled by pain and anger — has, if anything, grown. No other American dramatist connects fiction so bracingly with history, or so bravely explores spirituality.



It’s the autumn of 1985, and we’re immersed in the parallel worlds of two very different New York couples. Joe and Harper are young Mormon marrieds, transplanted from Utah. Joe, with the help of mentor Ray Cohen, is a potential rising star in Republican politics. Louis and Prior, a gay couple, are facing a far less certain future — Prior has been diagnosed with AIDS, and Louis, a deeply conflicted person under the best of circumstances, can’t cope with the consequences. Their personal stories play out against a vivid tapestry of politics and culture.

*Millennium* stands on its own as a complete evening of theater, but it also sets the stage for more. And what a stage! At the Wilma, director Zizka and her design team (scenery by Matt Saunders, lighting by Russell Champa) have mounted *Millennium* with breathtaking elegance that’s all the more beautiful for its simplicity — a brilliant white box that transforms itself over and over again. Zizka’s choices are often daringly unexpected — several key scenes are played out in

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shadow, and the use of an upper-level promenade bisects conversations across wide spaces — but they are always insightful. Intellectual vigor is a hallmark of Zizka's work, and her sardonic wit is on full display here; the badinage crackles throughout.

For many scenes, that's enough. But *Angels* is more than a fantasia on national themes: It's also an elegy, a rumination on the bottomless despair of unexpected loss and the superhuman courage required to overcome it. On this level, the Wilma production doesn't engage as fully. Sometimes it feels like we're skating over the emotional peaks and valleys instead of confronting them. The eight fine actors in the ensemble — Kate Czajkowski, Aubrey Deeker, Maia DeSanti, James Ijames, Stephen Novelli, Benjamin Pelteson, Mary Elizabeth Scallen and Luigi Sottile — were consistently excellent in the humorous and argumentative sequences, but somewhat less effective in the darker moments. (To be fair, I did see it on opening night — things may well deepen over time.)

But make no mistake — the Wilma's *Angels* is a monumental achievement. Still ahead for Zizka is the even greater challenge of *Perestroika*, which is longer and not nearly as well-organized. I can't wait to see what she does with it. Meanwhile, *Millennium* awaits. *Through July 1, \$39-\$56, Wilma Theater, 265 S. Broad St., 215-546-7824, [wilmatheater.org](http://wilmatheater.org). —David Anthony Fox*

Neil LaBute pisses people off, and I love it.

The third of LaBute's plays about America's obsession with personal appearance (following *The Shape of Things* and *Fat Pig*), his 2008 Tony-nominated Broadway hit *Reasons to Be Pretty* starts outrageously, ends with brief and surprising positivity (though all its relationships are doomed) and resists easy classification and explanation. But it sticks with you like a nightmare (and, let's face it, happy dreams are rarely memorable).

*Reasons* starts with a nasty battle: Steph (Genevieve Perrier) berates her boyfriend Greg (Daniel Abeles) about his description of her looks as "regular" to buddy Kent (Paul Felder), a discussion overheard and reported back to Steph by Kent's wife Carly (Elizabeth Stanley). Is this damning evidence of Greg's true feelings, or a tossed-off comment unfairly exaggerated? Couples, begin your own arguments now.

However you feel about it, the adjective makes Steph violently angry — "Throw the fish in the toilet again," Greg tells her, "it's not like I'm going to be surprised!" She also retaliates verbally, with a public recitation of an excruciatingly detailed list of Greg's physical flaws. It's funny stuff if crazed meltdowns and savage insults make you laugh; or a bitter reminder of relationship-ending fights if, like me, you've survived a few you'd rather forget.

*Reasons* goes along like that, stripping away layers of brittle relationships between lovers and friends. Maria Mileaf's lean, muscular production, framed in gray (of course — nothing is black and white) by Vince Mountain's set, gut-punches the romance and loyalty out of us. Kent's boasting and cheating, Carly's manipulation and neediness and Steph's vivid mood swings give us little to admire, but like highway rubberneckers, we can't look away.

Only sad-sack Greg shows glimmers of progress — an anomalous ray of hope in LaBute's work that's criminally overemphasized in Mileaf's drawn-out final moments, which turn Greg into a self-realized hero. It's unconvincing: If any of LaBute's characters ever grow up, it's not going to be that easy. *Through June 24, \$46-\$59, Suzanne Roberts Theatre, 480 S. Broad St., 215-985-0420, [philadelphiatheatrecompany.org](http://philadelphiatheatrecompany.org). —Mark Cofta*

What's the weirdest possible premise for a musical? I would have said the forcible opening of Japan to American trade interests in Sondheim's *Pacific Overtures*, but then I saw *Tulipomania*. Michael Ogborn's musical, loosely based on history, explores the Dutch tulip craze of the 1630s, during which wild enthusiasm for the flowers and their bulbs — in particular, a rare variegated variety called *Semper Augustus* — sent prices soaring and caused what's been referred to as the world's first speculative economic bubble.

A teensy-but-entertaining cabaret piece might be made of this, but composer/lyricist/librettist Ogborn is aiming bigger: *Tulipomania* aspires to be a kind of Brechtian moral fable about greed and politics. This would, however, require cogent, thematically rich writing. Instead, we get a parade of twee, by-the-numbers songs in dizzyingly incompatible styles, only fitfully reminding us that Ogborn has previously exhibited real talent.

The show also is mystifyingly framed as a play-within-a-play in which the denizens of an Amsterdam pot bar play all the characters — a confusing conceit that apparently was added during *Tulipomania*'s long development process. (The Arden commissioned the musical in 2005 — you'd think in the seven years it took to get to the stage, somebody might have realized all was not well.)

To the Arden's credit, they've mounted the show with style, and cast it with an ensemble far better than it deserves. In particular, Jeff Coon, playing the bar owner/narrator (a la the Engineer in *Miss Saigon* — one of many ideas Ogborn appropriates from other, better musicals) dispenses golden tone and boyish charm by the bucketful.

Let's hope Ogborn stops before venturing deeper into the canon of Dutch historical fantasy (anyone for *The Holey Dike Debacle of 1431? The Great Gouda Famine?*). Meanwhile, if it's tulips you're looking for, stick to Longwood Gardens. *Through July 1, \$34-\$45, Arden Theatre Company, 40 N. Second St., 215-922-1122, [ardentheatre.org](http://ardentheatre.org). —David Anthony Fox*



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EgoPo's Jewish-themed 2011-2012 season has already seen productions of *The Diary of Anne Frank* and *The Golem*. The third and last play, *A Dybbuk*, is the only one not set during the Holocaust, and it's arguably the most Jewish of the three.

The play, written by S. Ansky in 1914, is a mystical love story. Or a romantic ghost story. Or a religious rumination combining earthly and supernatural forces. Both Tony Kushner's 1997 adaptation and artistic director Lane Savadove's production (Philadelphia's first) make *A Dybbuk* feel distinctly modern despite its early-1900s Ukrainian setting, exploring gender division and sexual repression as well as questions of commitment and fate.

Robert DaPonte plays Chonen, an obsessive Kabbalah student longing for Leah (Rachel Kitson), a rich man's daughter promised to another. The Talmud "can lift you to God in slow and sure steps," the students learn, but Chonen's idea that sin comes from God and is therefore godly becomes a dangerous shortcut. Not even Chonen's death can keep him away from Leah: At her wedding, his spirit, the titular dybbuk (Yiddish for a malevolent spirit that possesses a living person), takes over the bride's body, and mystic rabbi Azriel (David Blatt) must perform an exorcism.



The first act develops slowly — the word "dybbuk" isn't even uttered until the second hour. But it builds to a stunning crescendo of broad comedy and brewing crisis as four students (Julian Cloud, Peter Andrew Danzig, Harrison Lampert and Josh Totoro, all brilliantly costumed by Katherine Fritz) play multiple roles at the wedding. Afterward, *A Dybbuk's* tone turns melodramatic and fantastic as Azriel battles for Leah's soul. Matt Sharp's eerie lighting and sound effects transform Matheus Fiuza's earthy set, though the most effective horror emits from the combination of DaPonte and Kitson as the possessed Leah.

This most Jewish of plays is surprisingly accessible, though a quick study of the program's glossary beforehand is helpful. These themes apply to many faiths, and the story proves as universally entertaining as those of other quality, semi-mystical fantasies like *Lord of the Rings* and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. Through June 17, \$20-\$50, Prince Theater, 1412 Chestnut St., 800-595-4TIX, [egopo.org](http://egopo.org). —Mark Cofta

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