

Stanley Kauffmann on Films

LIBERALIZERS

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About Tony Kushner as a playwright, debate continues. About Kushner as a human being, the matter is settled. A new documentary, called **Wrestling With Angels: Playwright Tony Kushner**, presents the Jacob who wrestled with angels in America, now doing most of his wrestling with devils. The essence of the film is that this man, with not a touch of evangelistic pomp, cannot conceive of life as anything other than a campaign to improve life.

Freida Lee Mock, an admirably skilled documentarian, followed Kushner from just after 9/11 until the 2004 presidential election. Much of this time was of course spent in or around the theater, but it becomes clear that Kushner believes in his theater work as a source of strength and possibility for other aspects of his life.

Like Bernard Shaw in just this one respect, Kushner takes his playwriting as an enabler. Because of his fame, he is invited to universities and conferences and other public occasions where he speaks. He talks about current politics and its stench, but mostly about ways to live and choose. For instance, at a college commencement, he tells the graduates what they are really commencing. Always he is briskly articulate (the Taliban are “theocratic thugs”) and irrepressibly genuine. What especially distinguishes his talks is their transmuted anger; the loathing of what he sees around him is transformed into concern for other people. And below that concern is a fear of despair.

The film takes us to Lake Charles, the Louisiana town where Kushner was born and brought up, and he goes visiting. We see the office of the lumber business where, he notes with pride and respect, his grandfather and uncle and father worked. We visit the temple that he attended, where they still have some of his childhood paintings on the wall, along with memorials to his grandparents. And we meet his father, who helps, in his very self, to explain the humanism of his son. (I kept wishing I were somehow related to that lovely man.) The elder Kushner, a music lover, talks about learning that his son is homosexual. After the initial jolt, he began to think of what Tchaikovsky’s father must have felt about his son. (“I would have been so proud I couldn’t see straight.”) And at the father’s eightieth birthday party, where the son reads a witty poem in his honor, Kushner père speaks the opening of Browning’s “Rabbi ben Ezra”: “Grow old along with me!/ The best is yet to be ...”



A New Film by Academy Award-Winner Freida Lee Mock
Director of *Mava Lin: A Strong Clear Vision*

In and around New York we see where the son lives--the dwellings improve along with his income--and we encounter friends, especially Oskar Eustis, the head of the Public Theater in New York. We attend Kushner’s same-sex (Jewish) marriage to his longtime partner. In the theater scenes, much of the backstage stuff is familiar in tone, but enjoyable if (like me) you enjoy such stuff. We attend a rehearsal of a children’s opera for which he did

the English text, an opera that had been performed at Theresienstadt before the children were taken to Auschwitz. We attend rehearsals of Kushner’s play *Homebody/Kabul* and of his musical *Caroline, or Change*, which is about a ten-year-old Louisiana boy and his family’s black maid. (This segment is interwoven with facts about Kushner’s boyhood.) My one

wiggle in the biographical material came with the frequent shots of Kushner at his desk, writing. How does one write for the camera?

Clips recur from the HBO film of *Angels in America*, which was wonderfully cast. Where else can we see Meryl Streep as an Orthodox rabbi? Streep also figures in a telling moment elsewhere. At a meeting in a church, she reads a prayer that Kushner wrote about AIDS, reproving God for not taking better care of things. It ends: “Pay more attention! Amen.”

Especially in the moving moments, this film prods us into a kind of reproof. Kushner is now fifty, a prime writing age, and we want more. Meanwhile, there is this portrait. Warts and all (and there aren’t that many warts), he is one of his best productions. In his afterword for the book of *Angels in America*, he wrote:

Together we organize the world for ourselves, or at least we organize our understanding of it; we reflect it, refract it, criticize it, grieve over its savagery and help each other to discern, amidst the gathering dark, paths of resistance, pockets of peace and places from whence hope may be plausibly expected. Marx was right: The smallest individual human unit is two people, not one; one is a fiction.

May Kushner write many more plays, but in any case it is good to have such a man around.

