

The Reluctant Star: Tony Kushner in America, and in Action

By SYLVIANE GOLD

It's one of those moments of filmed introspection beloved of documentary makers: Tony Kushner - playwright, leftist, gay activist, is alone in a New York art gallery peering at a painting. Wary audiences at **Freida Lee Mock's new film, "Wrestling With Angels: Playwright Tony Kushner,"** might well wonder how that moment came to be. Did Ms. Mock say, "Tony, I'd like a shot of you looking at art?" Did Mr. Kushner say, "Freida, won't you shoot me looking at art?"

None of the above, Mr. Kushner said after folding up his collapsible bike and toting it up to his tiny office, a former supply closet in a Union Square office building. (He rented it for \$300 a month after "Angels in America" opened on Broadway in 1993.) During the three years Ms. Mock filmed his comings and goings — from the fall of 2001, when he was readying "Homebody/Kabul" for its New York premiere, to the fall of 2004, when he went to Florida as a Kerry volunteer — he became, well, let's call it inattentive about keeping her abreast of his activities. So periodically she would telephone to find out what he was up to. On one of those days he was off to a gallery to see a friend's painting.

Why, exactly, would someone who is often described as shy, who is palpably "anxious" (Mr. Kushner's term) and "self-flagellating" (Ms. Mock's term) and whose work, when he's not being what he calls "delinquent," often entails sitting alone in a room, agree to be the central figure in a documentary?

Mr. Kushner, 50, who is also famous for his garrulousness, has a number of answers, one of which has to do with the appeal of "Project Runway."

"I can't sew two dishcloths together," he said. "Watching these people actually make clothing is fascinating to me. I think most people are interested in how people actually do the things that they do. The life of a working playwright is maybe something people have some curiosity about."

Ms. Mock, who won an Oscar for her 1994 documentary about

another politically engaged artist, "Maya Lin: A Strong, Clear Vision," had not seen his plays. She was less interested in the life of a working playwright than she was stirred by the one-minute speech he gave at her daughter's commencement from Wesleyan University.

"It was such a stunning tour de force," she recalled by telephone from her home in Los Angeles. "Basically: I'd like you to think about some evils in this world that you can do something about. It stayed with me: both the ideas and his charisma, both his humor and the seriousness." When she read, right after the Sept. 11 attacks, that he had written a prescient play about Afghanistan, she decided to pursue him.

He was reluctant at first.

"I don't like the way that I look, I don't like the way that I sound," he said. Moreover in a writer's existence, "there's nothing to show." But Ms. Mock's approach coincided with a busy time, when several of his projects were approaching completion and he had numerous speaking engagements. There would, he realized, "be some kinetic activity to record." He had liked Ms. Mock's previous films, and he liked her. He decided to give in: "The reasons that I had for not doing it were not as strong as the reasons I had for saying, 'Sure, why not?'"

Ms. Mock characterizes the push-and-pull relationship that then developed between them as "a little bit like being on call." Mr. Kushner's assistant would pass along his monthly schedule. But then she'd learn about things that weren't on it. Little things, like a reading of his work at an antiwar event in Providence, R.I.; big things, like his father's 80th birthday party in Lake Charles, La.; and even bigger things, like his wedding to his partner, Mark Harris, at a New York restaurant.

In the end it all wound up in the film, which opens Wednesday at Film Forum in New York, although before getting permission to shoot the wedding, she assured him the camera would be the size of a baked potato. ("It turned out to be more like two baked potatoes,"



Photo: Todd Sholtz

she said, with documentary scrupulousness.)

The movie also follows Mr. Kushner to the set of Mike Nichols' 2003 HBO film of "Angels in America" (and then to the Emmy Awards), to rehearsals, to classroom talks with students, to the Lake Charles synagogue where he had his bar mitzvah, even to his diet doctor's office, where he sheepishly takes off his sweater and removes his money clip before stepping on the scale.

"Mark thought I was nuts," he said of the weigh-in scene. "I thought I had to do it." Still, he describes himself as "a churlish and uncooperative subject."

"I didn't know what I was letting myself in for," he said. "I would turn around, and there would be Freida and her intrepid crew, running on the other side of the street and hiding behind trash cans." For her part, Ms. Mock said, she never expected the film to take as long as it did.

Oskar Eustis, the artistic director of the Public Theater and a longtime champion of Mr. Kushner's work, confirmed his friend's description of the process.

"Freida was everywhere," he said, speaking from his office. "From 2001 to 2004, almost every time I saw Tony in public, she was there. She's incredibly charming and very self-effacing. We forgot about her a lot."

Mr. Kushner was of two minds on that last point. "The whole thing with 'the camera disappears' is nonsense," he said. "The camera changes everything." Still, he conceded, "It was fun having her around, as much as she would al-

low herself to be present, given that she aspires to a documentary-filmmaker anonymity: 'I'm not here. Just pretend I'm not here.'"

He appreciated the journalistic reticence. But the same quality is responsible for one of the film's glaring omissions.

"I'm not a universally beloved figure," Mr. Kushner said. That fact is barely apparent in the film, which sidesteps the sometimes vituperative response to his outspoken politics. Ms. Mock said she had not made a decision to ignore the critics.

"I don't think it's hagiography," she said. "We all look for controversy. We were bracing for it. It didn't happen. Had something come up, I would have included it." She pointed out that the uproar over the way "Munich" (for which Mr. Kushner wrote the screenplay with Eric Roth) portrayed Israel's response to the massacre at the 1972 Olympics occurred after she was done filming.

All in all, Mr. Kushner said, he was glad that he had agreed to go ahead with "Wrestling With Angels." But as of a week ago, he had not yet mustered the courage to watch it all.

"I've heard really nice things about it," he said. "And I think I'm being a little bit of a baby." But, he added: "I told Freida when I agreed to do this that there was a chance that I'd never see it. I think she thought that I was kidding."

Ms. Mock said she had no memory of the exchange. But it's O.K. with her if he never sees the movie.

"It wasn't a condition," she said.