

Dramaturge's Notes

Angels in America Part I: Millennium Approaches by Tony Kushner

The Robert Cohen Theatre

Fall 2013

Notes by Katie B. Turner

Brief Production History

Angels in America Part I: Millennium Approaches was commissioned in 1990, workshopped in Los Angeles at the Mark Taper, and given its official premiere in San Francisco by the Eureka Theatre Company in 1991. The play next appeared in London in 1992 at the Royal National Theatre to critical acclaim, followed by *Part 2: Perestroika* the following year. Both plays were produced together for the first time in 1992 in Los Angeles. *Millennium Approaches* received its Broadway premiere the following season, opening at the Walter Kerr Theatre on May 4, 1993 and directed by George C. Wolfe. The Broadway production ran for 367 performances. Tony Kushner developed both parts into a successful HBO miniseries in 2003. *Millennium Approaches* was revived by the Signature Theatre Company in 2010. The play has also been produced by countless universities, high schools, and regional theatres across the United States. This year marks the 20th anniversary of the play's Broadway premiere.

Awards

Pulitzer Prize for Drama (1993)

Tony Awards (1993):

Best Play

Best Actor (Ron Liebman as Roy Cohn)

Best Featured Actor (Joe Mantello as Louis)

Best Director (George C. Wolfe)

Drama Desk Awards (1993):

Outstanding New Play

Outstanding Featured Actor (Joe Mantello as Louis)

Outstanding Featured Actor in a Play (Stephen Spinella as Prior)

Outstanding Director of a Play (George C. Wolfe)

Notes on the Play

In many ways, Tony Kushner's *Angels in America* saga is a series of encounters with history. The vast amount of historical references in the scripts allude to many figures born before the twentieth century, while many other figures mentioned are still alive today. Those familiar with Kushner's works will already be acquainted with his keen historical insight. To those new to his writing, what I wish to point to in *Millennium Approaches* is the manner in which Kushner invokes the particular moment of the mid-1980s to both look at that moment itself and to emphasize how the past has shaped the present, while asking what this may mean for

the future. Kushner avoids the didactic tone of a history lesson by weaving historical realities into the rich lives of his characters, revealing how history originates in the daily choices of ordinary individuals. It is this consideration that gives *Angels in America* currency for audiences twenty years after its premiere, inviting us to consider not only what has changed and what has remained the same in the intervening years, but also to consider what role we ourselves have played in our nation's drama.

Angels in America Part I: Millennium Approaches takes place in New York City over several months, from the last weeks of October 1985 to the first weeks of January 1986, around the time of Ronald Reagan's second inauguration. In the New York City of the mid-1980s, the twin towers still formed a recognizable part of the skyline and Times Square had yet to receive the massive infusion of capital that would make it the prime tourist destination it is today. Front-page headlines of *The New York Times* alternated between the spread of Communism in Soviet-allied countries, the Reagan administration's activities at home and abroad, and the wide range of issues surrounding the growing AIDS crisis (at the time not yet formally acknowledged by Reagan). The disparity existing between the rich and the poor was as alarming as it is now, defense spending sent the federal budget into the largest deficit in American history, and tax rates for the wealthiest Americans were at an historical low. What Ronald Reagan heralded as a new era of freedom and prosperity was, for many, a time of struggle and despair.

While all of the political exigencies of the 1980s influence the play, the AIDS crisis of the 1980s is an important historical touchstone for *Millennium Approaches*. Not only is AIDS a medical reality for two of the play's main characters, but it functions symbolically in the play in the same way it did in reality, representing a major issue of the time over which conservative and liberal ideologies violently collided. There are few social issues of this period which demonstrate the fanatical bigotry of the right and the extreme compassion (and its limits) of the left as did the politics behind the AIDS epidemic. While conservative religious and political leaders were denouncing AIDS as a justifiable punishment for homosexuals and drug abusers, grass roots movements in San Francisco and New York were creating health care and hospice support networks for AIDS patients. When the ultra-conservative Reagan administration reduced funding for AIDS research despite rising death tolls, individual efforts by non-profit organizations to raise money for research increased dramatically. The reactions to the AIDS crisis, like the anti-nuke demonstrations of 1983 and the demonstrations against the economic crisis in 1981, revealed a society deeply divided in its political and moral foundations. To a large degree, *Millennium Approaches* is an investigation of how large-scale national tensions play out in the minutiae of people's everyday lives, humanizing polemics in a way newspapers and other media rarely achieve. The characters' struggles with AIDS in this play test the limits of both prejudice and hope.

Aside from providing a social and historical context for the play, the AIDS crisis serves as a sort of prism to refract the play's various perspectives on the theme of justice. It seems that each character's attitude towards (or ignorance of) the true human cost of AIDS defines their attitude towards justice. Justice first appears in a literal form, represented by the Hall of Justice. Here "justice" is ostensibly connected with the fair and impartial implementation of the law. We quickly learn, however, that the personal discriminatory attitudes of those with political clout corrupt legislative justice beyond recognition. By considering justice in this way, Kushner illustrates the risk hysteria poses to the ideals of justice posed in the Constitution. To play on the final words of "The Pledge of Allegiance" one might ask, liberty and justice, for whom? On a more abstract level, ideas of *personal* justice permeate much of the play, connected more to love

than to the law. How characters treat one another, where love falls short or overflows, what words are said and why lies are told all connect back to questions of fairness, equity, kindness, and devotion. As Belize says in Act 3, “Justice is simple. Democracy is simple. Those things are unambivalent. But love is very hard. And it goes bad for you if you violate the hard law of love.” Characters suffer the most in this play for crimes of the heart, not violations of the law.

To encompass the epic landscape of *Millennium Approaches*, Kushner employs a full palette of theatrical techniques. The rapidly changing locations demand a highly versatile yet minimalist set, while the moments of what Kushner calls “magic” require sumptuous moments of true illusion. Many critics of this play invoke the name of German political theatre director Bertolt Brecht when describing Kushner’s work, drawing a parallel between Brecht’s distancing techniques and the episodic and often split-scene structure of *Millennium Approaches*. According to Brecht, “When something seems ‘the most obvious thing in the world’ it means any attempt to understand the world has been given up.”¹ This means that a play, if it is to teach its spectator anything, must point at the things one “knows” and ask her to consider them anew. Kushner achieves this by oscillating between keeping the theatrical apparatus in view and encapsulating the spectator entirely in brief but luscious moments of magic. In this way, he avoids the pitfall of Realism, which tends to present events as fixed rather than changeable. The realistic acting style set in abruptly short episodes, the fascinating improbability of strangers appearing in each other’s dreams, and the frank seriousness of ghostly apparitions who can dial a rotary phone are all techniques Kushner uses to draw the audience in while simultaneously creating room for critical distance.

Called “the most thrilling American play in years” by the reviewer of the Broadway premiere², *Angels in America Part I: Millennium Approaches* is a theatrical megalith, veering wildly between the personal and political, the historical and the fictional, the epic and the intimate, the real and the hyper-real. In this play, history and imagination collide to produce a cultural artifact best described by the subtitle to the work, “a gay fantasia on national themes.” What makes this play so memorable is that, even at its most fantastic, Kushner’s work points not only to the reality of the play’s political moment, but to the events preceding it and to what might happen after, implicating us all in the ongoing narrative project that is the history of the United States of America.

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Historical Figures in the Play

Roy Cohn (1927-1986). While many playwrights take liberties when representing historical figures, Kushner’s portrayal of Roy Cohn suffers very little exaggeration. The swaggering, power-hungry lawyer of the play mirrors his real-life counterpart. Cohn first came to prominence for his role in the trial of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg in



¹ Brecht, Bertolt. “Theatre for Pleasure or Theatre for Instruction.” In *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*. Ed. and Trans. John Willett.

² Rich, Frank. “Angels in America; Millennium Approaches; Embracing all Possibilities in art and Life.” *Rev. of Angels in America Part I: Millennium Approaches, by Tony Kushner, dir George C. Wolfe*. Walter Kerr Theatre, New York. *New York Times* 5 May 1993, late ed.: C15. *ProQuest Newspapers*. Web. 13 Oct 2013.

1951. His prosecution of the Rosenbergs and his role in the Communist “witch hunt” contributed to the hysteria surrounding the Cold War. He gained further notoriety for his activities in his position as counsel to Joseph McCarthy’s Government Operations Committee. In this post, Cohn investigated U. S. State Department libraries in Europe, naming books by authors such as Langston Hughes and Dashiell Hammett as Communist propaganda. Cohn resigned from this post after his efforts to manipulate a subcommittee to gain preferential treatment for a colleague were exposed. Following this Cohn returned to New York to open a private practice. In New York, Cohn cultivated a large network of political connections, including many judges, and had extensive ties with the media as well. These connections conferred on him a high political profile and added to the aura of his public persona. Cohn was also involved in several lawsuits, with the accusations against him ranging from bribery and tampering with juries to suits from vendors for not paying his bills. Cohn was disbarred in 1986 for unethical behavior. Cohn died that same year of complications due to AIDS, which he insisted was liver cancer. The revelation of Cohn’s homosexuality after his death was a great shock to many, as Cohn, like many other conservative anti-Communists, decried homosexuality as immoral, emasculating, and unpatriotic.

Ethel Rosenberg (1915-1953) and Julius Rosenberg (1918-1953).

In many ways, the story of Ethel Rosenberg and her husband Julius epitomizes the climate of the McCarthy era in the United States. Although Ethel is the only one to appear in the play, her fate cannot be separated from that of her husband. Ethel and Julius were both born and raised in New York City in a low-income Jewish neighborhood. They met in 1936 and were married in 1939. In college, Julius studied engineering and earned high academic honors. Ethel worked in clerical jobs until her children were born. In 1940, Julius was hired as an engineer for the Army Signal Corps, but was fired abruptly in 1945. The grounds for his termination were that he was a member of the Communist party, which he denied to no avail. Five years later, former co-worker David Greenglass and his wife implicated the Rosenbergs in an espionage case, naming them as co-conspirators in the passing of sensitive nuclear research findings to the Soviet Union. The Rosenbergs were convicted of treason and sentenced to execution. Numerous public demonstrations were given against the ruling. While these demonstrations had little effect, they represent the largest public resistance to the political hysteria of the Cold War. The Rosenbergs’ sentences were carried out on June 19, 1953 in New York’s Sing Sing prison. To this date, Julius and Ethel Rosenberg are the only civilians to be executed for espionage in the history of the United States. Efforts from the Rosenbergs’ sons and other supporters have produced a great deal of evidence showing their trial and conviction to be based on fabricated evidence, while other documents have surfaced ostensibly reinforcing their guilt. The question of not only the guilt or innocence of the Rosenbergs but the legality of their prosecution remain unanswered today. Just as Ethel haunts Roy in *Millennium Approaches*, the Rosenberg trial continues to haunt American political history.



Dramaturge's Notes

Cat on a Hot Tin Roof by Tennessee Williams

The Little Theatre

Fall 2014

Notes by Sara Galloway

The cultural and historical complexities of the US South finds expression in each of the characters we meet in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, and in no one more so than Big Daddy, the Pollitt family's dying patriarch. As a robust, crudely eloquent and poetic figure, Big Daddy's life seems to parallel important changes taking place in the South in the twentieth century.

Purportedly born in 1890, sixty-five years prior to his probable last birthday celebration that sets the play's action, Big Daddy witnesses the turn of the twentieth century in the same year he drops out of school at the age of ten. By the year 1900, Jim Crow laws have not only been instituted throughout the American South but the force of law has upheld this version of apartheid in the landmark case *Plessy v. Ferguson*. This case produced the now infamous "separate but equal" doctrine that effectively continued the violent disenfranchisement of racial enslavement by limiting the freedom of movement and contract for Black people and laborers. With little education, Big Daddy reportedly hopped train cars and labored in the plantation fields for ten years, working his way through the ranks of the Southern economic system. In this way, Big Daddy intersected, but ultimately advanced through, the violently restrictive economic landscape of the South at the turn of the century. Big Daddy's transience and apparent flexibility with regards to his early employment set him up to acquire one of the most important and complex positions on a plantation.

In 1910, two men in an ambiguously intimate relationship, Peter Ochello and Jack Straw, gave Big Daddy the opportunity to act as a manager—historically referred to as an overseer—for their plantation in the Mississippi Delta. The role of a manager has important historical and entrepreneurial elements that carry over from slavery, though with significant changes. Managers are squarely positioned between the labor force that worked in the field and the somewhat removed owner that expected a certain amount of profit. At the turn of the century, the Jim Crow South experienced a mass northern migration of Black laborers to escape racial violence as well as an influx of immigrants to the financially viable agricultural stronghold of the plantations; it is at this somewhat turbulent time that Big Daddy assumed the in-between position of a plantation manager and successfully balanced the dual-pressures that typically left this position as a revolving door of transient working class white men. A robust understanding of the mechanism of the plantation system was absolutely necessary: this required both an ability to succeed

entrepreneurially in relation to the owners' profit-seeking, as well as manage the varying forms of employment that sustained larger plantations at this time, such as sharecropping, tenant laborers, and wage workers. Big Daddy must have succeeded in both of these regards to grow the Ochello and Straw plantation to its monumental 28,000 acres.

Throughout the first few decades of the twentieth century, Big Daddy's association with and acceptance of the suggestively homosexual relationship between Ochello and Straw as their business partner not only foreshadows the tenderness with which he later articulates his suspicions of his son Brick's homosexuality, it also reflects a growing attention to human sexuality as distinct from moral impositions of religious dogma and social conservatism in the US. In somewhat juxtaposition to the institution of "Hollywood Production Codes" in 1934 that banned representation of homosexual relations in film and on television due to purported immorality, in 1938 American biologist Alfred Kinsey began collecting data for two highly controversial but significant reports on human sexuality that would be published preliminarily in the 1950s and subsequently reveal objective, scientific truth behind typical sexual behavior in the US. From nearly thirty years of interview data with over ten thousand white college students, Kinsey determined that sexuality, defined both through behavioral history and psychosexual reactions, does not amount to a static category (either homosexual, heterosexual, or bisexual) but is made up of fluid behavioral patterns. For the first time in American history widespread campaigns against homosexuality, such as Senator McCarthy's efforts to equate homosexual behavior with the threat of communism, were met with sturdy scientific evidence and energetic momentum from outspoken gay and lesbian political movement against inflammatory rhetoric. Big Daddy's decision to associate with Ochello and Straw, and maintain a quiet though clear understanding of their clandestine sexual relationship, could be seen as a reflection of the slowly shifting perceptions of human sexuality that added further complexity to the cultural history of the US, especially in the South.

By the late 1940s, having thrived despite political and economic instability that put most plantations in a cycle of declaring bankruptcy every twenty years from both world wars and the Great Depression, Big Daddy would have had one of the few and one of the largest financially viable plantations in the South. Throughout this period, Big Daddy's success is reflected in his anecdotes about his and Big Momma's world travel. An unexpected nuance to his anecdote is his close emotional attention to the abject poverty and sexual exploitation he witnessed in Morocco and scathing criticism of capitalist-materialist obsession throughout Europe. These two critiques highlight the contradictory fact that his travel seems to mirror major American political invasions in the early- to mid-twentieth century, specifically Morocco in 1942 and occupied areas of Europe in 1945. As a figure of economic prosperity and patriarchal control, his comment on these specific issues of foreign nations offer even more complexity to Big Daddy's character that is not expected of a white, Southern plantation owner who expresses typical racist attitudes toward Black Americans and agency-robbing hypersexualization of young women, such as

Maggie. But these aspects of Big Daddy's characterization offer ripe complication for the dramatic action that will unravel in the play.

Which takes us to the present year of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*: 1955, in the richness of the Mississippi Delta and the heart of the American South. Part of Big Daddy is dying of intestinal cancer that is spreading throughout his formidable body, but part of Big Daddy will not die with his body: his legacy and the history he was made to take part in and thus reflect. The fertility of Big Daddy's 28,000-acre plantation is juxtaposed with his proliferating cancer and the stunted intimacy between Brick and Maggie that threatens a paternal transfer of estate to a son who is struggling to live through the contradictions that Big Daddy seems to have mastered. This hereditary embodiment of lived contradictions expresses itself as a diseased and ailing body that seems to express the violent suppression of inequality that defined a way of life for white, Southern families. Just before the family gathers for this birthday celebration, *Brown v. Board of Education* overturned the "separate by equal" doctrine as inherently unconstitutional, which is but one success of the on-going Black struggle for freedom that is on its way to attaining popular media attention. The world of the play has not yet experienced the Montgomery Bus boycott, which will happen towards the end of this year. The stronghold of explicit white supremacy is being shaken and confronted with its own inherent contradictions. These contradictions are expressed through Big Daddy's potential heirs: alcoholism and sorrow that Brick is struggling against contrasts with Gooper's anger at his non-reward for doing everything "right", just as Maggie's repudiation of typical female chastity contrasts with Mae's flaunting of motherhood. As the last bastion of the "old South" is being challenged, these contradictions and contrasting approaches demonstrate how a younger generation is posed to understand and sort through the densely complex world and history they are inheriting as legacy.

Dramaturge's Notes

Bloody Bloody Andrew Jackson

Lyric by Michael Friedman and book by Alex Timbers

Music Composed by Michael Friedman

The Claire Trevor Theatre

Fall 2013

Notes by Maria Patrice Amon and Leticia C. Garcia

Bloody Bloody Andrew Jackson reframes our 7th president as a rock star. This rock musical, with music and lyric by Michael Friedman and book by Alex Timbers, creates a parallel between the prototypical rise of a rock and roll star and Andrew Jackson's rise to national politics. Jackson was a Washington outsider whose brash and rebellious political style upset the traditionalist politicians.

Friedman and Timbers first workshopped and staged *Bloody Bloody Andrew Jackson* with *Les Freres Corbusier*, a New York Theatre company founded by Alex Timbers. The group reworks historical figures and events in new, ironized, or irreverent contexts. The 2010 off-Broadway production was recognized with the 2010 Drama Desk Award for Outstanding Book of a Musical and went play on Broadway and received multiple Tony nominations.

The effect of resituating the respected historical narrative of the US presidency into a world of aggressive music is to create a space to question the events of the past and to realize the lasting legacies we live today.

The distance of time creates a sense in which historical events function as detached facts of life. Friedman and Timbers's play intentionally juxtaposes the historically venerated with the contemporary profane in order to make us, as an audience, realize our complicity in lasting inequities.

The intentional irreverence of *Bloody Bloody Andrew Jackson* sets iconic moments from American history in the frame of contemporary pop culture. In the show members of the political elite speak like "valley girls", they curse obscenely, they eat Twinkies, and they squabble like petty children fighting over a television remote control. This mockery pulls political figures like Henry Clay and John Quincy Adams down from the elevation historical distance creates and forces us to reconcile their actions within our contemporary social expectations.

Bloody Bloody Andrew Jackson, fittingly, opens a season at UCI which focuses on themes of justice. Jackson claimed injustice after his first bid for president was lost in a backroom deal among the political elite despite Jackson having won the popular vote. As a president Andrew Jackson's legacy includes the Indian Removal Act and the Trail of Tears, in which an estimated 4,000 people died. Questions of access to justice surround Jackson's presidency and form the central focus of the show.

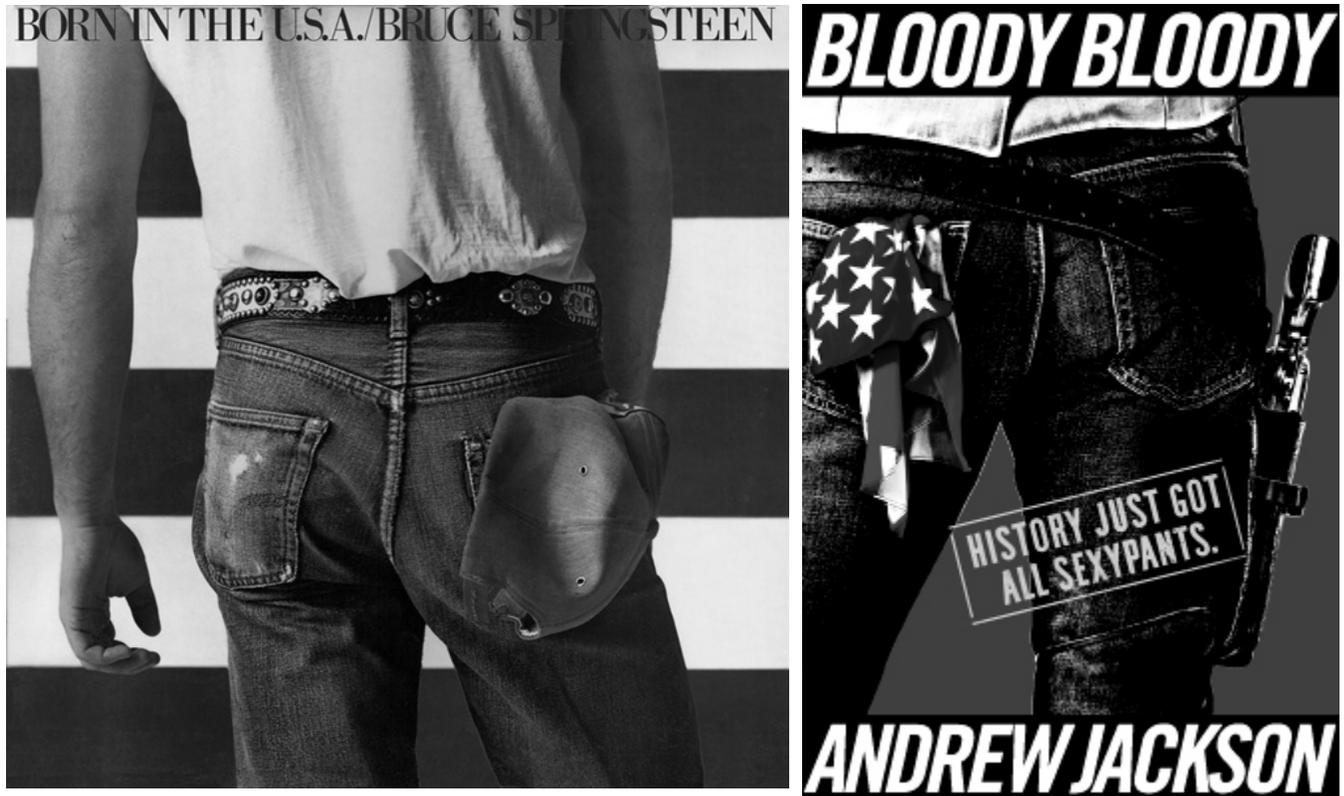
Bloody Bloody Andrew Jackson is a dream project for a dramaturg. Dramaturgs often work like archeologists searching to uncover and expand historical and cultural found in the words of the playwright and lyricist. Dramaturgs bring the actors and the design team articles, videos, and discussions on the political, historical, and social world of the play.

Friedman and Timbers's script and lyrics constantly juxtapose the sacred and profane to create extreme contrasts that serve to illuminate the theme of justice. As dramaturgs we had the opportunity to tease out these connections for the creative team behind *Bloody Bloody Andrew Jackson*.



For example, the first page of the *Bloody Bloody Andrew Jackson* script features this image of the title. The image is a visual homage to the 1970's rock and roll band AC/DC. The lightning bolt in between the letters was designed by Gerard Huerta in 1977 for the band's album "Let There Be Rock". *Bloody Bloody Andrew Jackson*'s use of the iconic typography demonstrates the importance of the presence the rock and roll aesthetic and provides a subtle indication of intent to recast history in an irreverent new context. Further, Huerta's lettering style was based on the Gutenberg's bible type and Jackson was the first president to effectively use the printing press to spread his populist message in his presidential campaigns. No doubt, if Jackson were to run for office today he would be a proponent of the widespread use of new media including

popularly accessible forms of social media.



The marketing design for the Broadway show continues this pattern of homage to iconic rock imagery through its reference of Annie Leibovitz's cover image to Bruce Springsteen's album *Born in the USA*. The visual parallels serve to emphasize the connection between historical figures and contemporary culture through intentional irreverence. This album's strong commercial popularity and lyrical support for the common man's struggle to achieve the American dream is a fitting match to *Bloody Bloody Andrew Jackson*.

Within the show there is a growing pattern of contemporary television references which reaches a peak in the final scenes of the play in which former-president Jackson speaks at a college graduation. Using television references to tell the story of Jackson post-presidency operates as a sort of incursion of the present onto the past. The contrast of his historicized speech against the contemporary medium of television creates a seeping of time across boundary lines. Television is a medium of the masses; it is broadcast across the nation and the world, thus breaking down boundaries in a populist means in much the same manner touted by Jackson himself.

Each of the pop culture references in *Bloody Bloody Andrew Jackson* returns to a thematic question deftly presented in director Myrona Delany's production: where do the people find justice? This musical is thematically centralized on the Jackson's fight for and admittance into the Ivory Tower of federal power. As a westerner and a self-made man Jackson was an outsider to the established patterns of power transmission and social circles of the Washington elite. *Bloody Bloody Andrew Jackson* creates a narrative of forced admittance in which Jackson leverages the "mass-ness" of the American people to create his space of entry; through turning to the expanding middle class of land-owning men Jackson harnessed the popular vote and won the presidency in his second attempt.

Jack's fight to expand closed power structures was a fight to secure justice for himself. Yet he presented himself as "the people's president," as the man who won the popular vote and had the will of the masses behind him. So the question of justice must expand beyond the man to the people. In the show the line "I am Andrew Jackson" is repeated frequently; as the characters each claim ownership of the identity we, as audience, are also called to become Andrew Jackson. Across the blurred lines of history *Bloody Bloody Andrew Jackson* positions each of us Andrew Jackson a man who was and is both hero and villain, both an individual and part of the masses, both searching for and responsible for justice.