



## Studying the Power of Connections and the Representation of Crises in the Virtual Performances of *The Great Work Begins* and *The Lines*

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### ABSTRACT:

The present article shall endeavor to analyze two plays from 2020 which have dealt with the horrors of the Covid-19 crisis and celebrated the power of connections and solidarity as the most potent available options for coping with an unprecedented calamitous situation. The two plays under consideration are the 2020 virtual adaptation of Tony Kushner's 1993 classic two-part play titled *Angels in America* now titled *The Great Work Begins: Scenes from Angels in America* and *The Line* (2020), a documentary play produced by Jessica Blank and Erik Jensen whose narrative is centered around the interviews with the frontline medical workers of New York City battling the COVID-19 outbreak. The article will attempt to describe how the virtual performances of these two plays not only challenge the traditional associations of physical proximity with solidifying connections and dramatization of the story with the evocation of strong emotional attachment in the audience, but by their virtual, fragmented and digital mode of representation, these plays appear to celebrate the power of human connection and empathetic understanding as two traits that can transcend any physical divisions or bridge any gulf.

Keywords: *Theatre; Crisis as Catalyst; Covid-19; Health Emergency; Crises and the North American Culture; Virtual Performance*

### Introduction:

"First of all we must recognize that the theatre, like the plague, is a delirium and is communicative", states Antonin Artaud (*The Theatre and its Double* 27). Since the advent of the Covid-19 outbreak, as physical performances in actual theaters have been negatively impacted, creators have sought to adopt newer ways of engaging with the audience with the help of digital media and virtual modes of representation. Back in March 2021, the Royal Shakespeare Company created the immersive, virtual reality play named *Dream* based on Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and in the process, the creators employed video gaming techniques of 3D rendering of graphics, cutting-edge motion capture technologies and various interactive techniques to build its immersive atmosphere. Holly Williams appreciates the uniqueness of such a virtual rendering of the Bard's immortal comedy thus, "As live theater sprinkled with some seriously high-tech fairy dust, "Dream" promises to bring "a most rare vision" of the play to our screens, to borrow a line from Shakespeare" ("*A Midsummer Night's Dream*", *The New York Times*). In case of these two dramas under consideration, namely, *The Angels* and *The Line*, we shall discover how the very idea of performance of the play itself as a serious medium for profound reflections on the condition of humanity has been changed with the advent of the paradigm of digital or virtual performance. However, as Taylor aptly comments in *Fortune Magazine*, "theater is just one example of how the pandemic transforming the performing arts" ("The Pandemic Revolutionized Theater" 1). Among other various immersive and interactive experiences, we have already seen how in 2020, British Government-sponsored The Future Demonstrators Programme sought to include more of the audience into a large-scale and immersive theatrical experience through such shows as *Robots and Dinosaurs/Lost Origin* and *Wallace and Gromit: The Big Fix Up*. In another such instance where the digital media sought to fuse the augmented and virtual reality is by introducing the performances of the rapper Travis Scott and the popstar Ariana Grande in the videogame *Fortnite*. As Charlie Kenber has commented, "digital interaction with the dynamic of time can render theatre more, and not less, immediate" ("Drama Goes Digital", 1).

Now, in this article, we shall focus on the two plays to see how these works have tried to stress on the need of forming new connections between characters in their struggles amidst different forms of crises while political establishments have been either callous or involved in creating unwanted barriers between people. In *Theatre in Crisis?* edited by Maria M. Delgado & Caridad Svich, we come across some important ideas and theories regarding the role of the established as well emerging kinds of theatres for responding to various crises. Alison Jeffers in her 2012 work *Refugees, Theatre and Crisis*, has defined crisis thus: "A crisis is defined as a crucial moment or turning point, often as an emergency which, by definition, requires action to be taken" (29). According to Balestrini et al., "Specifically, the word crisis captures a sense of not knowing whether a particular situation we find ourselves in heralds a transition toward something better or worse than the present" ("Theater of Crisis" 2). In the two-part special volume of *Studies in the Literary Imagination, Twenty-First-Century American Crises: Reflections, Representations, Transformations*, Fernández-Caparrós and Brígido-Corachán have endeavoured to provide "a series of reflections that may help us understand the shape and core preoccupations of twenty-first-century crisis narratives" (*Re/presentations of Crisis* viii). Wallace et al. in their *Crisis, Representation and Resilience*, have striven to articulate the various ways in which 21<sup>st</sup> Century British plays attempt to address the ethical and social aspects of various forms of economic, environmental and public health crises. The history of representation of health crisis in pandemic situation has a rich and long tradition that dates back to as far as 425 B.C. when Sophoclean masterpiece *Oedipus Rex* was composed. In the play, we find mention of an unknown plague wreaking total havoc on mortal beings: "The god of plague and pyre / Raids like detestable

lightning through the city, / And all the house of Kadmos is laid waste, / All emptied, and all darkened; Death alone / Batters upon the misery of Thebes” (52). In fact, between 430 and 427 BC, there was indeed a plague in Greece that decimated one third of the Greek populace. Huremovic (2019) describes this Athenian plague in the following words: “in 430-26 B.C. during the Peloponnesian War, fought between city-states of Athens and Sparta. The historic account of the Athenian plague is provided by Thucydides, who survived the plague himself and described it in his book *History of the Peloponnesian War*” (“Brief History of Pandemics” 10). In May 2020, Oscar Isaac starred in the role of Oedipus in Theatre of War’s virtual theatrical Zoom play titled *The Oedipus Project*. Euripides’ *Hippolytus* too featured some kind of transmitted disease, referred to in Greek as *nosos* or *loimos*, and *miasma* or the spread of the infection. In Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, we see how Prospero curses Caliban and invokes the “red plague” to fall upon Caliban (1.2.364), while Lear in *King Lear* describes his daughter Goneril as “a disease that’s in my flesh ... a bile, / A plague-sore, or an embossed carbuncle, / In my corrupted blood” (2.4.222-225). In *Romeo and Juliet* we see when Mercutio is wounded by the sword of Tybalt, he curses both Romeo as well as Juliet’s houses by saying, “A plague o’both your houses” (3.1. 94). Later, too we see when the Priest Lawrence sends a messenger to Romeo describing his plans to temporarily make Juliet unconscious so as to make her look dead, the messenger himself is reported to be in quarantine due to the outbreak of some unknown disease. In the 19<sup>th</sup> Century theatre, Henrik Ibsen in his *Ghosts* (1881), employed the disease of Syphilis and dealt with the effects of pandemic on the stage. However, it is Ibsen’s *An Enemy of the People* (1882), that presents us with a more harrowing and complete description of pandemic on the stage. Here, we see one Dr. Thomas Stockmann trying to convince the townspeople and politicians that the Baths in the town have been contaminated with a bacterial strain, but none believes him. In 2020 digital adaptation of the play by Otterbein University we see how Zoom rehearsals and even the performance via Zoom again proves the power of digital storytelling and representation. Here, the director Leibowitz decides to cast the actress Abby Messina in the lead role of Stockmann, thus further problematizing the conflict between the concern for public health and economic profiteering. Leibowitz himself states, “The conflict in the play is rooted in a dilemma that pits public health against economic well-being...” (quoted in Grossberg, “Past Is Present”, *The Columbus Dispatch*). Charles E. Rosenberg brilliantly attempts to draw parallels between the “predictable narrative sequence” of a three-act play and the response of a society to a pandemic situation: “Just as a playwright chooses a theme and manages plot development, so a society constructs its characteristic response to an epidemic” (qtd. in Venkatesan et al., *Pandemics and Epidemics*, 22).

The present study shall show that it is not by expecting the administration or government to function efficiently, impartially and responsibly but by the sincere attempts by ordinary, unsung individuals that a moment of crisis can be successfully challenged and overcome. Thus, it is in their combined struggle against the outbreak of a crisis that the connection among humans emerges as a decisive factor time and again in ensuring the continuation and forward movement of life with all its complexities and conundrums intact. Regarding the study of the role of plays in staging crisis, Vicky Angelaki’s penetrative work titled *Social and Political Theatre in 21st-Century Britain: Staging Crisis* offers a reading of the plays of nine 21<sup>st</sup> Century British playwrights to see how they dealt with the economic and political crises in their plays. Paul Crosthwaite in his 2011 work *Criticism, Crisis, and Contemporary Narrative*, has attempted to explicate the roles of cultural and literary critical theories in facilitating our conceptualization of the various aspects of economic, environmental, geopolitical, and public health crises.

American playwrights and directors Jessica Blank and Erik Jensen have achieved something akin to a mastery over the documentary theatre and have broken new grounds in the ultra-realistic storytelling with the creation of such compelling docu-plays as *The Exonerated*, *Aftermath*, and *Coal Country*. *The Exonerated* portrays the stories of some wrongly convicted individuals as they come and go on the stage while describing uninterruptedly their plight while they were being wrongly imprisoned under the state-sponsored criminalization on false charges. Some of the characters who describe their unfortunate situations are Delbert, Gary, Robert, Kerry, David and Sunny whose names have been all changed but their stories are all based on real-life interviews with actual convicts on a death-row. Gary was incarcerated after being accused of murdering his parents based on flimsy evidence. Robert and Delbert were accused of murdering and raping two white girls all based on mostly racial profiling and very little evidence. Kerry too was convicted of raping a white woman on the basis of some insufficient evidence and David was racially victimized and forced into confessing of killing a white cop. Next, *Coal Country* is based on the interviews given by the survivors of the horrific 2010 blast at a coal mine named Upper Big Branch Mine in West Virginia. In the play *Aftermath*, we see how the lives of the immigrants were changed and how the delicately balanced social fabric of the national life suffered severely and was damaged irreparably because of the 2003 attack of USA on Iraq. After the US invasion, these people were left with no home, no territory and no society to call their own. The play begins with the first words spoken by one pharmacist named Rafiq which are then interpreted by Shahid in English and for the rest of the play, we see conversations taking place mostly in English. In the story of Abdul-Aliyy, an Imam, we hear references to the infamous Abu Ghraib prison, and we are told how the Imam was imprisoned merely because the guards of his mosque were carrying firearms. All these documentary-styled plays are based on real stories and dramatized interviews seem to drive home the point that certain experiences, traumas and pangs of displacements cannot be translated, accurately put in words or represented even through actual, physical performances. The creators of the play *The Line*, Jessica Blank and Erik Jensen have stated, “*The Line* presents a fundamental redefinition of what it means to protect and serve, examining the fault lines in our system through the words of the brave people who show up every day to care for us all” (Quoted in “The Line,” *Public Theatre* 1).

The same can be said about Kushner’s *Angels in America*, where we see how the representation of the grief, affliction and isolation of the AIDS-affected young generation of the 80s or the Covid-19 affected youths in 2020 adaptation of the play demands us to look inwards to find any possible answers. Jessica Hume’s 2022 essay “No Country for the Infirm” attempts to re-read Kushner’s legendary work “in the light of COVID-19 to demonstrate the fault lines and inconsistencies of the universal components of Americanism such as future orientation, equity, and equality among others” (Venkatesan et al., *Pandemics and Epidemics* 8). As Howard Bloom (2005) aptly comments, “Reality in America has beggared fantasy and one wants to implore Kushner to turn inward, rather than dramatically confront a continuous outrageousness that no stage representation can hope to rival” (*Tony Kushner* 2). Kushner’s plays have always attempted to embed individual concerns within the larger framework of socio-political realities of any given period. Kushner’s debut play *A Bright Room Called Day* (1985) portrays how American socio-political fabric during Reagan era bore strong parallels to the degeneration of Weimar Germany’s democracy into a fascist rule. In *Hydriotaphia or The Death of Dr. Browne*, Kushner presents history both as a tragic reality as well as a farce where Bertolt Brecht meets Ben Jonson and the action spirals out from one rich man’s deathbed to one that spans the entire Heaven and Earth.

In *Reverse Transcription: Six Playwrights Bury a Seventh*, the action revolves around the attempts of six playwrights when they decide to bury their companion and the seventh playwright who died of AIDS.

### Representation of Crisis in *The Line*:

In the documentary-theatre play titled *The Line*, we see a series of interviews with the real-life covid-19 fighters as they are being interviewed by the doctors from New York. Set against the background rung with the original score by Aimee Mann, we see how Jessica Blank and Erik Jensen employ a huge number of stars such as Lorraine Toussaint, Alison Pill, and, Santino Fontana, to create a dramatized representation of the real-life heroics of the first responders during the outbreak of Covid-19. In Blank and Jensen's previous documentary-styled theatrical plays, we see how several problematic issues have been addressed ranging the tragic stories of six convicted death-row inmates who actually have been wrongfully convicted of various serious charges as murder and rape in *The Exonerated* (2000), the plight of Iraqi refugees in Jordan in *Aftermath* (2009), to the traumatic experiences of the miners who survived the massive explosion at the Upper Big Branch mine in West Virginia that killed 29 miners in *Coal Country* (2020). In *The Line*, we see how the characters who belong to different professions seem to be drawing connections between their previous experiences in various critical situations and their present encounters with the viral outbreak of Covid-19. However, what is interesting to note is that each time a frontline responder struggles with a new crisis, it seems to trump all such past experiences of fighting a previous critical situation massively and absolutely. Jamey Sheridan who is playing a character named Ed in the play, is one among such six characters who recounts his experiences in Iraq, Kashmir, Afghanistan, and Haiti when he had to evacuate the wounded soldiers and civilians in the battlefield in makeshift hospitals. Then, we see the stories of Jennifer, a geriatric caregiver and Sharon, a first-year intern, who recount their fight against the Covid-19 and these descriptions become harrowing because they are all real. Then there are Dwight and Vikram, the former an oncology nurse, and the latter a doctor in the emergency ward, who also join the play with their real stories about their fight against the viral pandemic. The play draws its power not from any theatricality or dramatic vigor, but because of its power of representing the stark reality without any exaggeration or modification. Just as *The Great Work Begins* draws parallels between the discrimination meted out to the marginalized and gay people during the AIDS era when Reagan was President and the callousness meted out to the non-American immigrants, similarly in *The Line*, we see how the play castigates the racial discrimination against the black and brown people during the pandemic period. Thus, both these plays seem to be quite emphatically driving home the message that any public health nightmares or critical situations not only make us realize the power of interconnectivity among humans but also lay bare the several underlying fissures and rifts that keep threatening to upset and destabilize any such connectivity in human relationships.

In *The Line*, we find how ordinary people from different professions are thrown into the midst of this pandemic crisis and how they manage to save lives while also witnessing the loss of many. Characters such as Vikram, an Emergency Response doctor, Dwight, a nurse, David, a former actor-turned-nurse, Sharon, a manager at a geriatric care facility and Oscar, an ambulance driver who transforms into an EMT officer after seeing the tragic fate of the Covid affected patients, are all drawn from the real life although their names have been changed. The most important fact that inextricably connects and binds all of them is that none of them were at all prepared to deal with the outbreak of such an unprecedented emergency and that they all strived to do their best to save the suffering patients. The play is a docu-play and it so often seems to blur the boundaries between journalistic style and the dramatized representation of real events via on-stage performance. In the play, one can hear Vikram saying, "You don't come to the emergency department unless you're having the worst day of your life. In the emergency department, everyone is having the worst day of their lives." This struggle of the ordinary individuals drawn from the various positions in life is then contrasted with the political and administrative mismanagement which resulted in an abnormally high percentage of deaths among the immigrants and blacks. The discrimination against the financially weaker sections becomes starker and more apparent as the play progresses. Vikram (Arjun Gupta), who himself gets affected with coronavirus during his shifts utters these lines which seem to capture the crux of the play quite succinctly: "All of us were afraid, right? Everyone. But that shared vulnerability, that shared fear, is something that certain communities could escape. They could work remotely, they could quarantine, they could go upstate or to the Hamptons or wherever. I can't tell you the last time a white person has delivered a *GrubHub* or a *Seamless* to my door. Through this whole thing, our economy has been on the backs of the Black and brown people who couldn't escape that vulnerability." The play is full of such technical words that gradually grow to become indispensable and eventually take over the lexicon in the process of describing this precarious health crisis. Among these words, PPEs, Ventilators, N95s, and Face shields have been some of the most recurrent ones. Here, we see how people try to bring their expertise from normal situations into play while dealing with the people suffering from the Covid crisis. Santino Fontana who plays David states, "My job is to listen. And respond. To give them power, and become an active responder to their needs." David used to receive training in acting before the pandemic broke out and he used to imitate Stella Adler and here, in the critical situation, in order to keep the patients jolly and optimistic, he admits of employing his acting skills to their full effects. Some of the characters like Sharon admits of speaking how they received their inspiration. Sharon says, "I remember being 11 or 12 and praying for a way to help people." She herself is a grandmother but her heartfelt devotion towards her geriatric patients whom she fondly called "gerrys" drove her to go back to their care during the outbreak even after she herself had gotten infected with Covid-19. "I love my gerrys", says Sharon in the play. Sometimes, the war paramedic Ed tries to compare the situation at present to the challenges he had to face in Iraq and Afghanistan. However, he does not hesitate to point out that in those situations he had to endure the fire and fury of the battle for only a few days, but here it continued for several weeks. As a dedicated paramedic who has always been engaged in his duties with a single-minded earnest, Ed admits how medics are the perfect examples of the unsung heroes since "nobody really knows who we are until you call 911... It's always cops and firemen." Also, he does not lament his condition or feel any kind of jealousy towards the cops and firemen for getting the limelight; rather, like a truly humble individual dedicated towards his task of helping out the victims, he accepts and appreciates his position and instead looks for receiving some financial benefits as a pensioner. Ed does not mind admitting, "I'll be eatin' cat food with the pension I got." Marilyn Stasio points out that the one central motif of the play's characterization is its peculiar mixing of the individuality and collective identities in a wholesome manner: "Individually they're a mixed bag, but collectively they share a single character feature: unswerving dedication to their jobs" ("*The Line*": Streaming Theater Review"). Besides this ultra-realistic portrayal of the harrowing tales of the first-time responders' fight against Covid-19, the background music by Aimee Mann and Jonathan Coulton also seems to be contributing towards the somber and

yet dynamic mode of storytelling of the play. The play employs quick monologues, fast paced cuts, and relentless realism that frequently makes us wonder whether we are watching a journalistic masterpiece of a documentary or an actual play. Peter Marks remarks in his review for *Washington Post*, “No distance is detectable between these performers and the health workers they portray: You get what feels like a total immersion in the frustration, anger and exhaustion of confronting a disease swamping New York’s hospitals in wave after frantic wave” (“The Line”). The play deliberately refuses to invest its characters with any sort of glory that one normally associates with traditional heroism, and instead strives to portray them as ordinary humans who stand out from the lot only by their intense power of caring for their fellow beings. Sharon, a novice and an intern in the play, only humbly expects to be respected by others in return: “I expect to be treated with dignity and respect.” Also, making the task of the health workers and doctors even more difficult is the persistent workload, lack of essential supplies, and an acute lack of necessary infrastructure for supporting the poor ones. Jennifer, another nurse, whose role is played by Alison Pill states, “It’s a public hospital, so the patients are poor, some of the poorest.” Sometimes the doctors or the nurses seem to grow overly attached to some patients to whom they have been entrusted to keep them alive more several weeks, but not always did they succeed. As Jennifer says, “I spent so much time trying to keep him alive.” The pandemic lays bare the underlying discrimination against the poor in no uncertain terms. Vikram exposes the inhuman situation even more cynically than others when he says that the entire system is so heavily biased against the poor that more often than not it is either “your money or your life.” The same strain of discrimination can be found in Kushner’s *Angels* too especially when we see how Cohn, because of his proximity to powerful government officials, receives a healthy supply of anti-retroviral drug named AZT while others do not, and Prior gets some AZT only when Belize and Louis smuggle some of the AZT to Prior. Now, coming back to the discussion of *The Line*, we see how Dwight, the male nurse points out how nurses are often the most underappreciated of the medical tuffs and doctors get all the attention, but he does not matter it as log as the patient gets out alive of the hospital. In Dwight’s words, “When you go for surgery, the doctor does what they have to do – but you can only come out of that hospital alive, I believe, if you have a good nurse.” The cast of the play conveys a strong message of diversity without ever indulging in romanticization of their actions and actors such as Nicolas Pinnock, John Ortiz, Jamey Sheridan, and Santino Fontana have conveyed the message of quiet heroism through a most down-to-earth and restrained performance. It is more like an illustration of what Peter Marks labels as an example of “impassioned professionalism”. Marks aptly observes, “The seven actors who portray nurses, doctors and emergency medical technicians create a compelling portrait of impassioned professionalism” (*Washington Post*).

### Representation of Crisis in the Reworking of *Angels in America*:

*The Great Work Begins: Scenes from Angels in America* (2020) is much more than a mere amalgamation of some memorable scenes from Kushner’s harrowing play set in the AIDS-era, and it achieves its greatness by making connections between the Covid-19 pandemic of 2020 and the AIDS of 1980s. In fact, the actual lines containing “the Great Work” feature towards the end of the Part I of the play titled ‘Millennium Approaches’, when we see how an angel crashes through the ceiling of the protagonist Prior’s bedroom and hails him as a prophet of a new age and proclaims that “the Great Work” has begun. Then, again toward the end of the ‘Part Two: Perestroika’, we see how Prior, gradually recovering from pneumonia and other illnesses, dreams of the legendary pool of Bethesda where the sick people could heal miraculously and proclaims that “the Great Work” shall continue. When Prior is dying from a full-fledged attack of AIDS, we see how he with his last breath still strives to deliver a message of hope: “Not me, alone, all of us, the ones who’re dying now. Maybe the virus is the prophecy? Be still. Maybe the world has driven God from Heaven” (‘Millennium Approaches’, *Angels* 119). James Fisher writes, “As with all of Kushner’s plays, *Millennium Approaches* offers a unique mixture of theatrical fantasy and social reality, while in *Perestroika*, Kushner continues, using the same characters, to expand and deepen the thematic and aesthetic levels of this complex drama” (*The Theater of Tony Kushner* 74). The play is interspersed with interstitial scenes featuring celebrities asking for donation on behalf of amfAR, or American Foundation for AIDS Research, which has been also collecting funds for fighting the Covid-19 menace. The play relies on celebrating the power of connections between individuals even though in reality, they might be far apart from each other. The importance of such connections is established right in the beginning especially by means of unique skills in videography as is evident when we see two characters from the play, namely, Prior Walter and Harper Pitt conversing with each other sitting in the same room while they are several thousand miles away in reality. The play reverberates with such remarkable lines as the last monologue which states, “This disease will be the end of many of us, but not nearly all, and the dead will be commemorated and will struggle on with the living, and we are not going away” (192-93). The play manages to sustain a strong current of optimism grounded in extreme, down-to-earth realism despite such famous actors as Jake Gyllenhaal and Alan Cumming making their intermittent appearances. In fact, various famous Hollywood stars have on different occasions made appearances in the 2020 virtual adaptation of the play. Speaking of the previous critically acclaimed adaptations of Kushner’s masterpiece, the name of Andrew Garfield easily comes to our mind. Garfield won the prize for Best Actor in the 2017 and 2018 adaptations of the play.

Erika Fischer-Lichte, almost in an Artaudian vein, speaks of the similarities between a contagious outbreak and the infectious power of physical theatrical performance. She puts it thus: “Here, theatre appeared to be capable of transforming individuals into members of a community, albeit only temporarily, by focusing on the bodily co-presence of actors and spectators, on the physical acts of the actors and their capacity to ‘infect’ the spectators as well as on the ‘contagion’ occurring among the spectators” (*Theatre, Sacrifice, Ritual* 30). However, we shall see from our discussion that the power of such a truly remarkable work of art such as Kushner’s *Angels* is not merely confined to its reworking in an actual, physical representation on a stage, but even in a virtual adaptation too, it impresses us as a unique work of human imagination and ingenuity. In the adaptation of Kushner’s play during Covid-19 situation, we see how the work repeatedly makes us aware of the negligence and callousness of the higher authorities which contributed to the worsening of the situation during the AIDS era, and this same negligence and callousness also came to haunt us again during the pandemic. Jesse Green, in his review of the play for *New York Times* observes, “Today, the light of Covid-19 turns out to be especially harsh and revealing, turning the play, so concerned with prophecy, into a prophet itself. How, it now seems to ask, can we have squandered in just a few months the decades’ worth of suffering and organizing and scientific advances invested in the struggle against AIDS?” (“Seeing a New Disease”, 1). Drawing a parallel between the two situations, Whoopi Goldberg in one of her appearances made in between the scenes of the play, does not fail to observe how “the government failed massively and disgracefully”. The drama employs some particularly dazzling and powerful scenes to infuse an eerie and almost otherworldly, feverish charm which is

evident when one sees the images of the four angels appearing and merging with one another while proclaiming their vision of the American worldview, “continental philosophies” and “the virus of time”. The play features some remarkable characters such as the closeted gay character Roy Cohn, the close advisor to Nixon and a close associate to Trump. It is Cohn who initially spearheaded the movement of denigrating the dehumanizing the gay people as the other and the AIDS itself as the other’s disease only to be later infected by the same virus and same disease. He is also shown to be harbouring a racist attitude towards the blacks and even in his deathbed, he feels that the presence of his nurse Belize is merely guaranteeing his total damnation in hell. During his final days, when he asks to be shown a portrait of the netherworld, he sees a diverse, dynamic San Francisco bubbling with liveliness and differences, “full of music and lights and racial impurity and gender confusion” (148). Ethel Rosenberg, the Jewish woman is another character whose spirit visits Roy Cohn on his deathbed and she initially even takes pleasure in Roy’s sufferings because the latter had been one of her prosecutors. However, toward the end, Ethel seems to forgive Cohn and recites Kaddish with Louis, the Aramaic Holy prayer which seeks to sanctify the Lord’s name. Cohn actually dies of AIDS but keeps on insisting throughout that it is his strange ‘liver cancer’ that is afflicting him, and thus he seeks to detach himself from the problematic associations of AIDS. In fact, this panicking attitude of Cohn towards a disease can be viewed under the light of what Alison Jeffers refers to as the ‘moral panic’ which is engendered and sustained by the combined efforts of the authorities and media and in such a situation, even a recognition of something as private and critical as a disease can cause enormous moral distress and pave the way for subsequent attempts at stigmatization. According to Jeffers, who has used it in the context of her study of the role of media in constructing our attitude towards the refugees, this moral panic “takes place when the media manipulates and defines false beliefs in order to create the framework through which to view the subsequent panic” (*Refugees, Crisis* 25). The play combines comedy and tragedy in a peculiar manner so as to produce something utterly disturbing and strangely optimistic in the end. Flashes of occasional comic reliefs occur intermittently as when Prior casually talks with Louis about their cat and Cohn appears to be engaging in some light-hearted banter with the ghost of the dead Jewish woman Ethel only to be interrupted later with the frighteningly tragic updates on the reports of Prior’s diagnosis or Roy’s steadily deteriorating health etc. to name a few. Prior Walter seems to be an exact foil to Cohn since the former transcends his tragic situation when he catches AIDS while the latter becomes totally distraught and maniacal. Belize remains the best friend of Prior and it is only because of Prior’s insistence that she chooses to become the nurse to the racist and homophobic Cohn. In fact, Prior seems to be transcended into a Prophet-like figure when the Angel of America visits him, and the Angel attempts to convince Prior to reject the idea of movement and change and instead embrace the ideas of rigidity, stasis and fixity. We see how in the play, Prior struggles as a reluctant prophet to uphold the power of movement and progress against the one advanced by the Angel called “The Continental Principality of America” (78) according to which the only way left for the redemption of mankind is to return to God by rejecting modernity and embracing the traditions of the old and bygone days. However, against this angel stands another angel named The Bethesda Angel who symbolically stands for hope and regenerative power of creative and artistic endeavours. A character Hannah says, “An angel is just a belief, with wings and arms that can carry you. It’s naught to be afraid of. If it lets you down, reject it. Seek for something new” (‘Perestroika’, *Angels*, IV.vi, 237). Jean Howard views The Bethesda Angel thus: “the angel embodies the earthly hopes of the human imagination using art to create new histories and new possibilities” (“Tony Kushner’s Angel” 9). As A. C. Muñoz points out, “As a convinced gay modern Marxist Jew, Kushner introduces a different optimised concept of history” (“Tony Kushner’s Angels in America” 3). Eventually, Prior successfully resists her temptations and rises to Heaven after accepting the painful truths of migration and movement. In the second part, namely, “Perestroika,” we see how it opens with the words from World’s Oldest Living Bolshevik named Aleksii Antedilluvianovich Prelapsarianov, who feels that it is in Change and Change alone that the answer to all their questions lies: “Are we doomed? The Great Question before us is: Will the Past release us? The Great Question before us is: Can We Change? In Time? And we all desire that Change will come” (13). Similarly, Joe Pitt is shown to be an ultra-conservative and reactionary and the play works subtly to take our sympathies away from him by showing how Prior’s friend and homosexual lover Louis overcomes his initial infatuation with Joe Pitt by distancing himself from Pitt’s ideology. Prior’s friend Louis Ironson who leaves Prior when he contracts AIDS also attains a form of emotional maturation through his stoical acceptance of the hardships and sorrows of life. AmfAR CEO Kevin Robert Frost comments on the timeless power of Kushner’s play in portraying the numerous ways in which administrative malfeasance and governmental incompetence combine to further complicate a pandemic situation: “*Angels* is an intensely personal work that is so much more than just an AIDS play and, in this time of COVID and national unrest, its themes of racism and government failings make it as relevant and resonant today as it was when it was first performed 30 years ago” (quoted in Kleinmann, *The Queer Review* 2020). In fact, Kushner himself has expressed his gratitude to the director Ellie Heyman and amfAR in making this online hour-long phenomenon a success: “I’m touched and honored that amfAR and the remarkable Ellie Heyman decided to build this evening around *Angels*” (quoted in Kleinmann, *The Queer Review* 2020). Heyman selects seven scenes from Kushner’s immortal play which won Pulitzer Prize in 1991 for its Act One titled “Millennium Approaches” and the parallels between the two health crises, namely the outbreak of AIDS and Covid-19 seem unmistakable and unforgettable to say the least. Besides Pulitzer, Kushner won National Medal of Arts and National Humanities Medal in 2012 from President Obama for his play and the adaptations of the play are also recipients of multiple Tony Awards, an Olivier Award, a Golden Globe and an Emmy for ‘Best Miniseries’ in 2003 etc. to name a few. The play never fails to impress its audience by virtue of its power of mixing of the immediate with the expansive, infusing the particular details with a universal implication, and combining the vision of a transcendental cosmic expansiveness with humanity’s and also the stage’s inherent physical limitations. Sara Holdren views it as “a piece of theater that’s immediate and immortal” (“Theater Review: *Angels*”, *Vulture*). According to Mandell, the play is “something more than a selection of eerie, riveting scenes from Tony Kushner’s landmark seven-and-a-half-hour AIDS-era play performed by a starry cast. It’s a gorgeous lesson in the power of making connections” (“The Line” Review”, in *Variety*). In fact, various adaptations of Kushner’s play have won several accolades in different years, and one actor who with this rigorous and disciplined performances in the lead role has distinguished himself on more than one occasion is none other than Andrew Garfield. In 2017, Garfield won the Evening Standard Theatre Award for the ‘Best Actor’ only to follow it up with four more awards, i.e., Laurence Olivier Award, Tony Award, Drama Desk Award and Outer Critics Circle Award for the Best/Outstanding Actor in a Play in 2018. Garfield donned the role of Prior Walter in the play. Commenting on the importance of fragmented nature of the narrative in Kushner’s *Angels*, McNulty observes in his review for *Los Angeles Times*, “The play is fragmented for a higher purpose: to shore up the vulnerable present through the example of the past, in which marginalized communities came together to confront an epidemiological tragedy that had been egregiously worsened by political incompetence and malfeasance” (“A Luminous ‘Angels in America’”). Mark Steynn in his Chapter ‘*Communism Is Dead*’, remarks about Kushner’s art of elevating and universalizing the various individual and insignificant deaths to the status of cosmic tragedy: “It takes insignificant, individual death and makes it part of a Civil War; it translates the humiliating attrition of a young,

healthy body by a behavioral disease contracted in the most banal way into a frontline sacrifice, part of the great cultural currents swirling across our age, part of a struggle for the nation's soul—against, inevitably, Presidents Reagan and Bush, or, as Kushner with his penetrating Pulitzer pen puts it, “those criminals” (9). In *Angels in America*, we see how the tension, drama and the subtler threads of the intricately woven storylines seem to be poised between the portrayals of two characters, namely Prior and Cohn. Even in the actual performance of the play, the two characters never really meet each other; rather, it is through the power of contrasting portrayals, that Kushner seems to be making a deep connection between these two. Sara Holdren in her review observes, “They are the twin poles of Kushner’s play — both victims and both, in their way, visionaries — and they require powerhouse performers” (Theater Review, *Vulture*). In the 2018 adaptation of the play, we see how Andrew Garfield and Nathan Lane pulled off stellar and breathtaking performances as Prior Walter and Roy Cohn respectively while other eight actors performed double roles to appear as twelve different characters. In the 2020 digital adaptation, multiple actors namely, Brian Tyree Henry, Paul Dano, Andrew Rannells don the role of Prior, while Glenn Close is cast as Roy Cohn. McNulty remarks, “Kushner’s work provides both a powerful diagnostic tool for understanding the expansive dimensions of the emergency and a communal road map to get us from alienation and grief to solidarity and healing” (“A Luminous ‘Angels in America,’” *Los Angeles Times*).

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### Discussion:

In both *The Line* as well as in *Angels* we see how the works point towards the dangerous and divisive discriminations inscribed within the system itself and how through connections and solidarity one might hope to rise above the divisions and differences. The Covid-19 era digital adaptations of both *The Line* and *Angels* seem to be two of the most powerful examples of the power of making and sustaining connections in combating the onset of any crisis and both these plays employ actors and actresses who perform digitally while being separated thousands of miles from each other and yet with their combined powers of performance, the cast seem to obliterate all divisions and distance. In fact, the apparently fragmented nature of these dramatic narratives is not only important primarily because of shooting of the scenes in a digital mode, but it is especially significant in emphasizing the power of connection between different people which is what determines the outcome in mankind’s battle against an unprecedented emergency.

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### Conclusion:

“The plague, in a word, cleanses. Like a boil it brings whatever would have remained noxious, hidden and festering to the surface — and expels it. Theatre can do likewise. It simulates the dark, unindulged passions, the abnormal feelings, of mankind (the actor is a murderer) and by expelling them at one remove, in performance, cleanses the performer and spectator alike in its collective experience” (Bermel, *Artaud’s Theatre* 11). We can conclude our study by stating that these plays are important because through their virtual mode adaptation during the Pandemic period, they seem to champion the power of unity and solidarity among human beings and portray it as the sole determiner in overcoming any critical situation while simultaneously purging the social body of the divisive, manipulative and dangerous political tendencies that always seek to corrode the spirit of unity and brotherhood to further their own agenda.

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