

The Salt Lake Tribune

Gays, Mormons and ‘Angels in America’: The landmark play took more than 25 years to get to Provo, but now it’s here ... in a shopping mall



By Rich Kane • Published: February 18
Updated: February 19, 2018

Provo • Cultural history-making can happen in the unlikeliest of places.

Next door to a Payless Shoe Source in an antiseptic, climate-controlled Provo shopping mall, for instance.

That’s where, inside a space that once housed a Radio Shack, you’ll find An Other Theater Company on the second floor of Provo Towne Centre.

“It actually fit really well with us,” says Kacey Spadafora, who, along with Taylor Jack Nelson, founded An Other last year after producing two award-winning plays at the 2016 and 2017 Great Salt Lake Fringe festivals. “We both grew up around here and remember when the mall was built and it was so cool. Now there are a lot of empty stores, so they’re looking to do different, experience-based things.”

The plays that Nelson and Spadafora are putting on in their theater — a 48-seat space tricked out with comfy padded church pews they found in Idaho — aren't the typical fare you normally see staged in conservative Utah County.

Take their current production of “Angels in America: Millennium Approaches,” the first half of Tony Kushner’s monumental Pulitzer- and Tony-winning play, with its strong gay, Mormon and AIDS storylines — sensitive topics for some, but perhaps more so when they’re being explored in front of a live Provo audience.



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While “Angels,” which debuted in early versions in 1990, has been staged in Salt Lake City several times (most recently by the Salt Lake Acting Company in 2010), Another’s production is a Utah County first.

It’s Nelson and Spadafora’s way of planting a flag, saying they’re unafraid of bringing challenging, potentially controversial work to a region they believe is starving for it. The Kickstarter funding campaign they used to get their mall space audience-ready easily surpassed their \$7,000 goal.

“In Utah Valley, if a play has a swear word, theaters won’t do it,” says Spadafora, who is also directing “Angels.” “If there’s a gay character, no one will do it. We want to do wildly popular theater that gets ignored here because it isn’t conservative and family-

friendly. There are so many people here who wish they could see certain productions, but they're told people wouldn't go. But if enough people are saying that, then maybe there is an audience here."

"Utah and Utah Valley have some of the highest percentages of theatergoers per capita in the nation," says Nelson. "The arts are so rich here, it's just that there's a very specific type of art that gets focused on. And with so many people into the arts in general, there's bound to be a niche market for the type of stuff we're doing."

Nelson and Spadafora attended Utah Valley University and say the UVU theater department will sometimes produce challenging fare, but no one else is being as ambitious as *An Other*. This summer, they'll also be staging Mae West's "The Drag," highly controversial and groundbreaking when it debuted in the 1930s for its accepting portrayal of gay life, and "How I Learned to Drive," which touches on pedophilia and incest.

But it's "Angels" that's already left a mark. The two-part play, which *Slate* in December called "the defining work of American art of the past 25 years," has moments that certainly feel risqué for Utah County. In "Millennium Approaches," the first half of "Angels," there's a line about Mormons performing oral sex. In the second half, "Perestroika," there's a scene where Joe Pitt, a closeted gay Mormon, removes his temple garments to show his lover, Louis, that he would give up his faith to be with him.

(Due mostly to time constraints — both parts of "Angels" add up to a seven-hour play — *An Other* is only doing the full production of "Millennium Approaches"; a staged reading of "Perestroika" will be presented March 9 and 10.)

This "Angels" staging is minimal, in line with Kushner's original vision. Actors recite dialogue as they move blocks that serve as props for beds and desks. And while no angel crashes through the Provo Towne Centre ceiling — perhaps the play's most indelible visual — the angel absolutely makes her presence known.

In choosing “Angels,” Nelson says An Other isn’t trying to be provocative. It’s just trying to provide a platform for voices that, in Utah County, don’t often get heard, particularly LGBTQ ones. The company also aims to bring more diverse voices to the region, mandating that at least three plays in the eight-show season be written by women, at least two have LGBTQ themes or main characters, and at least one be written by an LGBTQ playwright.

And Nelson and Spadafora, who both grew up Mormon but are no longer involved with the church, feel that the launch of their theater and the “Angels” production amounts to fortuitous timing.

“So many things are intersecting,” says Nelson. “There’s this big cultural conversation going on here about homosexuality and its relationship to Mormonism. Everyone in Utah County has a friend or neighbor who’s been in a situation like Joe Pitt’s, where there’s a mixed-orientation couple and then suddenly their secret is out and they have to deal with it.”

The LGBTQ community in Utah County is becoming more visible. In September, the growing Provo Pride celebration will feature a parade for the first time in its six-year history. Encircle House, a resource center in Provo for LGBTQ youth and their families, just marked its one-year anniversary and figures prominently in the new documentary “Believer,” in which Imagine Dragons singer Dan Reynolds explores his faith’s often negative treatment of LGBTQ people. (The film was one of the hardest to get into when it premiered at the Sundance Film Festival in January.)

In some ways, this growing visibility offers some answers to questions that “Angels” was asking over two decades ago, so closeted Mormons like Joe Pitt never have to feel lonely and isolated again.

“I think there’s always been this thought that if you’re LGBT in Provo, then you’ll have to leave, you’ll go to Salt Lake,” says Spadafora. “But I don’t want to leave. It’s not my job to get out of your way, it’s my job to be who I am where I am. It’s never going to

get better for LGBT people in Utah County if everyone from that community abandons it.”

“Sometimes people just need to get away, I understand,” Nelson says. “But if you’re in a place where you’re comfortable where you are, there’s a certain responsibility to help influence the community you’re from to be one that’s more accepting of people like you. This is the kind of theater I wanted to see since I was in high school, these are the kind of plays I’d been reading and wishing I could see. And now I get to.”

And if an actor breaks the heel of a shoe, there’s the Payless, conveniently next door.

‘Angels in America: Millennium Approaches’ at An Other Theater Company

The production’s cast includes Trevor William Newsome, Noah Kershnik, Hailey Nebeker and Bryce Lloyd Fueston. **When** • Friday-Saturday, 7 p.m., through March 3. A staged reading of “Angels in America: Perestroika” will be performed March 9-10 at 7 p.m.

Where • Provo Towne Centre, 1200 Towne Centre Blvd., Provo (second floor, near Dillard’s)

Tickets • \$13-\$15, available at the door or at AnOtherTheater.org



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