

TINY KUSHNER
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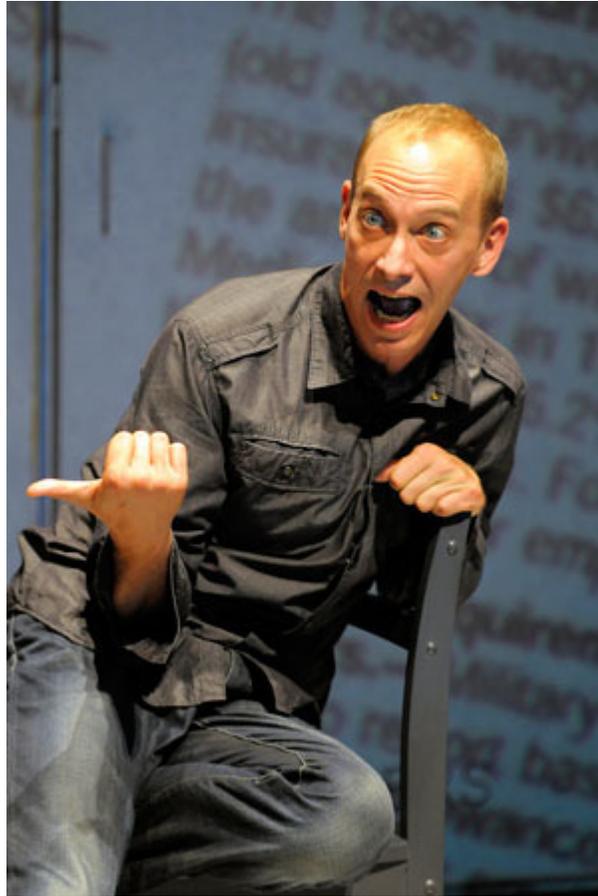
(l to r) At Berkeley Rep, Valeri Mudek and Kate Eifrig star in the West Coast premiere of *Tiny Kushner*, a series of short scripts by Tony Kushner. Photo courtesy of mellopix.com

A couple Lifers reported back on the recently closed run of five shorts by Tony Kushner (*Angels in America*) at the Berkeley Rep with positive feedback.

The first piece, titled "Flip, Flop, Fly!" derived from two actual personalities, both of whom died in 2002. Geraldine, Queen of Albania, after living a fairytale existence that moved from rags to palace, she was exiled for

most of her life after Italy invaded that country in 1939, and was allowed to return shortly before her death at the age of 92.

Lucia Pamela was a flamboyant entertainer whose trademark was the blurring of lines between fact and fiction. Pamela racked up many colorful achievements over the course of her lifetime. She was crowned Miss St. Louis of 1926. She managed an amusement park in Fresno, where she also dressed up as Mother Goose. She had two radio programs: The Encouragement Hour and Gal About Town. She started an all-girl orchestra that she called Lucia Pamela and the Musical Pirates, as well as a musical duo with her daughter (who went on to own the St. Louis Rams later in life) that she called the Pamela Sisters. She also claimed to have once visited the moon -- prior to the Apollo missions. Her musical documentation of this visit, recorded in 1969, remains a cult classic among aficionados of American kitsch. Kushner has the two of them meet on the moon.



At Berkeley Rep, Jim Lichtscheidl stars in the West Coast premiere of *Tiny Kushner*, a series of short scripts by Tony Kushner. Photo courtesy of mellopix.com

The "East Coast Ode to Howard Jarvis" picks up on a true story about a misdirected tax revolt in New York City in 1997 in which city employees, including a number of police officers managed to avoid having federal income tax withheld from their paychecks for years. The scam began with a set of instructions purchased through a website. The instructions were sold many times over and directed individuals to claim 98 dependents and declare themselves entities separate from any kind of federal oversight. Howard Jarvis was the man whose strong detestation of any sort of taxes produced the populist voter's revolt that put Prop 13 into place in 1978. Jarvis, himself was a demagogue who ran

unsuccessfully for office many times on an antigovernment platform that leveled invective against any and all institutions, such as public libraries, fire departments, and public schools.

Jarvis had been dead 10 years when the New York City tax scam was uncovered, but his legacy of tax revolt may have paved the way for the widespread evasion scandal. Jim Lichtscheidl shines in this one-man piece, playing at least two dozen characters by varying his vocal inflection and body language.



At Berkeley Rep, J.C. Cutler portrays Nixon's analyst in the West Coast premiere of *Tiny Kushner*, a series of short scripts by Tony Kushner. Photo courtesy of mellopix.com

"Dr. Arnold A. Hutschnecker In Paradise" refers to the man who acted as psychiatrist to Richard Nixon, the only therapist ever to have had a president as a client. Nixon certainly remains a controversial figure, but Hutschnecker was no

stranger himself to contention and not shy about asserting his opinions, Hutschnecker left Germany for New York in 1936, under powerful persuasion, after publicly calling Hitler a pig. He later proposed that the United States government should require political leaders to obtain a mental-health clearance before being allowed to take office. He found himself embroiled in controversy after the release of a 1970 White House study on crime where he is said to have suggested that seven- and eight-year-old perpetrators of serious crimes be treated in "camps." He later clarified that he was offering this in the context of his own positive associations with summer camp as a child. He remained active and outspoken on issues where mental health intersected with politics well until his death at age 102 in the year 2000.

In the long-titled "Terminating or Sonnet LXXV or *"Lass Meine Schmerzen Nicht Verloren Sein"* or Ambivalence", a gay man, suffering from violent neurosis insists on seeing his female therapist after she has terminated the official business relationship because he frightens her. Each character has behind them a lover who speaks in the scene without physically being in the room. The suggestion at the end of the piece is that the therapist is about to die, either as a matter of course or by her own hand.

"Only We Who Guard The Mystery Shall Be Unhappy" has Laura Bush, portrayed by Kate Efrig, invited by an angel (Valeri Mudek) to read to several dead Iraqi schoolchildren on the other side, none of whom speak but who emit songbird music from their mouths, specifically Messiaen's classical interpretations of songbirds. The angel describes the horrific circumstances of

each child's death and then Laura Bush decides to read to the children from *The Brothers Karamazov*, specifically the "Grand Inquisitor" chapter, because she figures that having passed over to the other side these kids can handle it.



At Berkeley Rep, Kate Eifrig portrays Laura Bush in the West Coast premiere of *Tiny Kushner*. Photo courtesy of mellopix.com

In lesser hands this scenario would decay quickly into obviousness and specific political rant, however Kushner, who is perhaps the most talented of lyrical writers for the stage today, lets the material rise above all that to explore quite deeply morality and responsibility. Our Reviewer mentioned that the play

also reveals the problematic trap of Fundamentalist Christian philosophy, which, if taken to its furthest extent, self-damns its strongest proponents.

Taken as a total theatre experience, the five plays all deal with the tensions between the surfaces of peculiarly American Dreams with all of their illusions and their abutment against harsh truths. Each playlet features either people who have died or who are about to die as well as polarities between imaginative illusions and "realities." The effect is surprisingly moralistic without being preachy, remaining solidly engaging theatre throughout. Our man said the series was well worth checking out.

Who's who

Tony Kushner, Playwright
Tony Taccone, Director
Annie Smart, Scenic Design
Anita Yavich, Costume Design
Alexander V. Nichols, Lighting and Projection Design
Victor Zupanc, Sound Design
Lynne Soffer, Voice and Speech Consultant
Marcela Lorca, Movement
Kimberly Mark Webb, Stage Manager
Mina Morita, Assistant Director

Cast (in order of appearance)

Jim Lichtscheidl
Valeri Mudek
Kate Eifrig
J.C. Cutler