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ANGELS IN AMERICA: ART UNDER ATTACK IN THREE THEATERS

by

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submitted to the Faculty of Arts and Sciences

of American University

in Partial Fulfillment of

the Requirements for the Degree

of Master of Arts

in

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To Mom and Dad because they took me to the theater,  
and to Josh for being my backstage partner in crime.
ANGELS IN AMERICA: ART UNDER ATTACK IN THREE THEATERS

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the attempts to suppress three different productions of Tony Kushner's play *Angels in America* and key issues faced by those presenting institutions under attack. The case of Charlotte Repertory Theatre focuses on the efficacy of attempts to prevent controversy. Catholic University of America's case focuses on academic freedom coming into conflict with religious teachings. Finally, in the case of Kilgore College, the thesis focuses on how a controversy over a play can turn into a personal attack.

The thesis reflects analytical thinking about attempts to suppress theater in the three specific cases. Information is drawn primarily from organizational and legal documents, articles, books, interviews, and the text of *Angels in America*. Based on this analysis and the facts of each case, recommendations are made for theaters presenting potentially controversial works (also applicable to other arts presenters).
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Tony Kushner, thank you for Angels (and for speaking with me at the Corcoran Gallery of Art last spring).

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CHAPTER 1

AN OVERVIEW OF ANGELS IN AMERICA

This thesis will examine the attempts to suppress three different productions of Tony Kushner’s play *Angels in America* and key issues faced by those presenting institutions under attack: Charlotte Repertory Theatre, Catholic University of America, and Kilgore College.

In the United States, attacks on art and artists in recent years have been a central public part of the “culture wars” following the wave of controversy over sexual themes in the visual and performing art of Robert Mapplethorpe, Andres Serrano, and four performance artists during the late 1980s and early 1990s. The culture wars of the last decade established a precedent in which controversial works of art were not only restricted from the public eye, but the artists and arts organizations were punished for having attempted to display the works at all. Court battles and public suspicion both crippled their ability to focus on art work. Today these battles have moved from a national arena to a local one. Governing bodies, whether county officials or university officials, have organized their own microcosmic cultural battlefields, and this thesis will look at three of them.

In many cities where *Angels in America* has played, debates have varied in intensity in the public realm. In 1996, North Carolina laws preventing nudity
On stage were enforced specifically in an attempt to shut down Charlotte Repertory Theater's production of both parts of *Angels in America* before it even opened. But, local courts barred any party from preventing its opening, and as a result, the production's detractors in the county government agreed to cut over $2 million to the local arts funding agency. This action denied significant grant monies not only to Charlotte Rep but to many other arts and cultural institutions in the city. Later that year, at Catholic University of America in Washington, DC, the university administration banned a production of "Part One: Millennium Approaches" that had been approved by the Drama Department because its members felt *Angels* was not in line with the university's mission. In 1999, at Kilgore College in Kilgore, Texas, the Commissioners of Gregg County expressed their displeasure at the play's homosexual content by cutting funding to the Texas Shakespeare Festival, an organization run by the same man who directed the school's production of "Part One: Millennium Approaches."

These three cases have been selected to represent the range of problems that can face arts presenters (including college theater departments whose productions are open to the public) both during and after opposing groups have exercised their power to prevent the display of controversial art. These cases cover a wide range of actions which include withholding space, cutting funding to the organization, and preventing advertising. The cases also demonstrate the diverse types of institutions that can face opposition, from a community college, to a large religious university, to a professional theater company. They represent different geographic areas of the United States as well. Despite the different circumstances, there are many similarities among the three cases as well. Both
Kilgore College and Charlotte Rep’s cases resulted in funding cuts to uninvolved institutions. The cases of Kilgore College and Catholic University introduce the issue of academic freedom’s clash with religious opposition. And, in the cases of Catholic University and Charlotte Repertory Theatre, opposition came before the play opened. In each case, religious groups opposed the play, and in two of the cases, religious groups formed alliances with local government leaders.

Yet, each instance is also unique. In Catholic University’s case, the play was suppressed by the administration which withheld space and kept advertising off campus. At Kilgore College, the administration supported the play, but county officials did not; they made a calculated strike at the Texas Shakespeare Festival because its director was also the chair of the college’s drama department. In Charlotte, despite the theater’s year-and-a-half long effort to educate the public in advance about the themes of Angels in America, county officials blocked the play from opening only to have their action prevented by court order a few hours before curtain-time. A year later, the same county officials made a multi-million-dollar cut to the local arts and science council. Many organizations in Charlotte were hit hard.

Angels in America has been staged on Broadway, on a national tour, in professional theaters, and on college campuses across the United States since its first production at San Francisco’s Eureka Theater in 1991. Brought to the attention of the public through these productions and extensive press coverage in many venues, the play has generated admiration, outrage, and public debates of varying intensities and outcomes.

Angels has been described as “the most ambitious American play of our
time.”¹ It has won numerous Tony Awards, Drama Desk Awards, Outer Critics Circle Awards, and the Pulitzer Prize for Drama. Subtitled “A Gay Fantasia on National Themes,” and divided into “Part One: Millennium Approaches” and “Part Two: Perestroika,” the complete work runs seven hours. Funded in part by a $57,000 grant from the National Endowment for the Arts in 1987, Kushner has said about the play, “it feels like a federal play, commissioned by the American people.” And on its length he has joked, “I felt taxpayers should get their money’s worth.”² The two parts are usually performed either on one day with a long break between parts, or over two consecutive nights. Some directors prefer to stage only “Millennium Approaches,” which is written such that it can stand alone.

The play takes place primarily in New York City during the mid 1980s, the height of the Reagan years, a solipsistic era when the AIDS epidemic was coming to the fore of the national consciousness. The characters are variously living, dead, real, hallucinated into being, gay, straight, black, white, Jewish, Mormon, Republican, Democrat, healthy, and dying. The seven principal characters are paired logically at first – gays with gays, Mormons with Mormons, Republicans with Republicans – but, internal stresses cause these couples to break apart and re-form in less logical combinations. The changes mirror those social changes happening in the U.S. in the late 1980s and early 1990s, “namely the decline of the conservative right, the resurgence of liberalism and the


²Tony Kushner, interview by Michael Kahn, “Playwrights on Stage” series, 24 April 2000, Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, DC.
growing political clout of the gay movement.\textsuperscript{3}

In the play, Prior Walter is left by his Jewish lover, Louis Ironson, when Prior contracts AIDS. Louis meets Joe Pitt, a closeted Mormon Reaganite married to Harper, a housewife with a fondness for Valium. Joe is able to acknowledge his homosexual feelings with Louis’ help but at the expense of Harper’s mental stability, his mother’s love, and his professional relationship with his mentor Roy Cohn. Cohn is one of two characters in the play taken from real life. The other is Ethel Rosenberg whose ghost torments Roy as he, too, falls victim to AIDS. In the hospital, Roy is tended to by Belize, a black, gay, male nurse, who manages to steal Roy’s AZT for Prior. Finally, there is the Angel. After several mysterious portents of her arrival, she crashes through the ceiling of Prior’s bedroom in the final moments of Part One, proclaiming, “The Great Work begins: The Messenger has arrived.”\textsuperscript{4} She proclaims Prior a prophet and takes him on a spiritual journey through Part Two.

In the wealth of plays and movies about AIDS that have been written in the last fifteen years, rarely do we find portrayals of gay men leaving their lovers because they can’t deal with sickness. In Angels, not only does Louis run out on Prior in the middle of the night as Prior lays in a hospital bed, but he heads straight to Central Park for a sexual encounter with a strange man. Kushner wondered if he would become a pariah in the gay community for writing a character like Louis. “On the other hand,” he says, “you have to be interesting,


\textsuperscript{4}Tony Kushner, Angels in America, Part One: Millennium Approaches (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1993), 119.
and you have to be daring, and you have to be willing to write things that shock. Shock is part of art. Art that's polite is not much fun."  

Most polite art does not evoke a response from the audience either. Kushner has spoken and written repeatedly of the influence of Bertolt Brecht's plays on his own. Brecht infused his drama with didacticism to incite the audience to act in some way, to take a role in some social cause. While studying Brecht in college, Kushner realized that "theatre, really good theatre, had the potential for radical intervention, for effectual analysis."  

In Angels, Kushner is calling upon audiences to do the same. He wants homosexuals to mobilize and politicize their struggle.

One example of Kushner's purpose is exemplified in the scene when real-life character Roy Cohn is diagnosed with AIDS. He tells his doctor to change his medical chart to show liver cancer because only gay men get AIDS. He explains that he can't possibly be gay because he has clout and gays do not. "Homosexuals are men who in fifteen years of trying cannot get a pissant antidiscrimination bill through City Council," he says to his doctor. The line is overtly critical of the gay community, and Kushner uses it subversively to incite more effective advocacy for the gay community both by gays and heterosexuals.

Angels in America brings gays to the fore of the national social and political landscape, asserting that homosexuals have played a significant role in shaping

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7Kushner, Angels in America, Part One: Millennium Approaches, 45.
the identity of the United States. David Savran, a drama scholar, said during an interview with Kushner, "Whenever I teach Angels in America, I start by noting how important it is that it queers America. As the subtitle makes plain, this is a play that deals with national themes and identities, and recognizes that gay men have been at the center of that."8

Aside from the apparent controversial wording and imagery in the play, there are more subtle aspects of the play that set it apart from other works. For example, the play does not follow a traditional, Aristotelian, "beginning-middle-end" dramatic structure with a catharsis at the end. Rather than the cathartic death of AIDS-stricken Prior that audiences might expect, Prior is still alive at the end of Part Two. Kushner has said, "... I have had people come up to me afterward and say, 'He didn't die at the end. Is that realistic?' They feel cheated of their deathbed scene."9

Angels has inspired debate and discussion, whether prompted by the queering of America, the call to ethical action, the unusual ending, the foul language, the nudity, or the frank depiction of the struggles gay men face. Joe Mantello, who played Louis in Los Angeles and New York, told one newspaper, "The play is controversial in a number of ways.... there are a lot of things that go against 'family values.'"10 Public opinion against the play has typically been limited to letters to the editor of local newspapers. In some cities, no outcries

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have been heard at all. However, in a handful of cities, initially productive
discussions about the play (whether in the media, church sermons, or a theater's
outreach efforts) have escalated into full-blown controversies. You will read
about three of them in this thesis.

How does Tony Kushner feel when his play is attacked? "It makes me
incredibly angry, of course. [Those who attack] never win on first amendment
grounds, but they do their damage."\footnote{Kushner, interview by Michael Kahn, Corcoran Gallery of Art.} The three cases presented in this thesis
will explore the kinds of repercussions that have resulted from attempts to
suppress Angels in America. Those repercussions, as well any benefits, the
theaters experienced will be discussed.
CHAPTER 2

ATTACKS ON ART IN AMERICA

During the twentieth century, the United States has experienced a series of controversies that have shaped the contemporary cultural landscape. The first such was the 1913 International Exhibition of Modern Art, or "The Armory Show."¹ It featured 1,600 new and progressive works from American and European artists, including Marcel Duchamp and Henri Matisse whose paintings of nudes (Nude Descending a Staircase and Blue Nude, respectively) were criticized not for their lack of clothing but for the modernist stylistic techniques used, notably variants of Cubism. Typically, the press attacked both painters as "inept and unartistic" and, when the show traveled to Chicago, Matisse was burned in effigy by art students.²

Like the modern art featured in The Armory Show, jazz music made its mark by providing a new alternative to the status quo. Like Cubism, which rearranged lines into a new order and new way of seeing, jazz ignored the standards of classic musical composition in favor of improvisation. Because the

¹Two sources were extremely valuable in researching this chapter: Public Broadcasting Service's web site "Culture Shock" and Richard Bolton's book Culture Wars: Documents from the Recent Controversies in the Arts.

music was improvised, there was a greater emphasis on the performer-as-composer rather than the two as separate entities. The music was born in the black American community, and opposition to the music by whites was inherently racist and class based. But, as jazz's popularity grew among white audiences, many clubs featuring the music became racially integrated. Jazz's detractors - who were already incensed by the mixing of whites and blacks - believed dancing in jazz clubs would encourage sexual activity. By 1930, at least sixty cities in the U.S. had enacted laws banning jazz from public dance halls.\(^3\)

As a reflection of the times, jazz began to appear in movies, along with gangsters, flappers, and illegal drinking under Prohibition.

The movie industry itself was rife with scandals, such as murder, rape, divorce, and drug abuse. In 1930, The Hollywood Production Code was adopted by the motion picture industry in which specific limitations were imposed on language, sexual activity and suggestiveness, crime, nudity, drug use, childbirth, miscegenation, and adultery. The Production Code Administration (PCA) was established to ensure the Code's enforcement. The PCA reviewed all films before release, and if they met the code they were given a PCA seal of approval.\(^4\)

In 1952, movies were granted protection under the First Amendment, and the Code was totally obsolete by 1968. Soon after, the Motion Picture Association of America established the age-based rating system still in use today. However, before this transition occurred, the late 1940s and early 1950s saw unwelcome

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\(^4\) Ibid.
government involvement in Hollywood. The House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC), spearheaded by Senator Joseph McCarthy, made its purpose to rid the United States of Communism. Hollywood was a major target of the Committee because of its visibility. With a history of employing left-leaning writers, and due to its previous scandals, the HUAC began to investigate Hollywood in 1947. They held hearings to find out who in the industry was a Communist and whether Communist propaganda was being subliminally written into films.

Eleven "suspects" were called to testify. Bertolt Brecht, the German playwright, denied affiliation with the Communist party but returned to East Germany following his hearing. The remaining ten included one director and nine screenwriters who became known as "The Hollywood Ten." Collectively invoking the Fifth Amendment so as not to implicate themselves or their colleagues, they were nevertheless jailed for up to a year. Edward Dmytryk, a prominent film director, cooperated with the committee eventually, but the nine screenwriters were blacklisted by Hollywood. They were only able to continue to sell their work to the studios by using pseudonyms.

In the first half of the 1950s, the HUAC targeted a new group of Hollywood workers, including actors, directors, writers and technical crews. Three hundred twenty-four people were suspected of Communist Party affiliation. Every one of them was blacklisted, regardless of how true these

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5The nine screenwriters were Alvah Bessie, Herbert Biberman, Lester Cole, John Howard Lawson, Ring Lardner, Jr., Albert Maltz, Samuel Ornitz, Adrian Scott, and Dalton Trumbo.
suspicions were. Even those who implicated alleged members received no favorable treatment and were blacklisted as well. The hearings eventually extended throughout the arts community, but always focused on writers, both novelists and playwrights. Among those in the theater community who were singled out were Elia Kazan, Clifford Odets, Arthur Miller, and Lillian Hellman. As was the case in Hollywood, those who became “friendly” witnesses and named names, such as Kazan and Odets, were never regarded in the same way again. Odets never wrote another play, and for years Kazan has been ostracized. Only recently, in 1999, when Kazan won a lifetime achievement award from the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, has his treatment in Hollywood begun to change.

In the 1960s, in the wake of the damage done by the HUAC and McCarthyism to arts and entertainment in the U.S., and after years of talk about a national commitment to the arts, President John F. Kennedy called for a policy that would define the government’s involvement in the arts. Recognizing that there were government agencies for science, technology, education, recreation, and health, but not the arts, Kennedy said, “I look forward to an America which will steadily raise the standards of artistic accomplishment and which will steadily enlarge cultural opportunities for all our citizens.” Based on Special Consultant to the Arts August Hecksher’s recommendations, the President’s Advisory Council on the Arts was established. By 1965, President Lyndon B. Johnson had signed legislation enabling the National Endowment for the Arts

(NEA) and the National Endowment for the Humanities to be established.

Funding levels to the NEA grew steadily each year following its inception, climbing above $150 million in 1984. At that time, the government grew increasingly involved in cultural policy and the determination of moral standards. One of the first things President Reagan did upon taking office was call for a review of the cultural agencies. He proposed a 50 percent budget cut to both endowments, plus the elimination of the Institute for Museum Services.7 Only ten percent of the budget allotments ended up being cut overall, and these losses were eventually made up as the decade progressed.

In 1985, an amendment was proposed in Congress to keep NEA grants from going to any work that could be deemed offensive or lacked merit. Debates ensued over the specific language of the amendment and how to determine these qualities. Specific works began to receive criticism as unworthy of government funding for their homosexual themes.

Over the next four years, works in all artistic disciplines were singled out for a host of alleged offenses. David Avalos's sculpture, *San Diego Donkey Cart*, placed on the grounds of the Immigration and Naturalization Service's offices in San Diego, was cited as a risk to national security because it showed a U.S. Border Patrol agent arresting an immigrant worker. Writer Margaret Randall was denied U.S. citizenship because, according to Judge Martin S. Speigel, "Portions of [her] various writing advocates the economic, international,

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and governmental doctrine of world Communism." In the Missouri case of Hazelwood School District et al. v. Cathy Kuhlmeier et al., the Supreme Court ruled in January 1988 that a school district may censor articles in a student newspaper that focused on students' feelings about divorce and pregnancy. Justice Byron White deemed it appropriate that schools remain neutral on "matters of political controversy." Officials took the children of Alice Sims claiming she engaged in child pornography; in fact, she had simply photographed her children naked to use as models for drawings. Finally, Martin Scorsese's 1988 film The Last Temptation of Christ drew the ire of Christian groups around the world. They objected to the film's portrayal of Jesus as a man struggling and confused by his dual nature, and in particular these groups were outraged by a scene in which Christ is tempted by visions of a "normal" life, including marriage, sex, and children. The U.S. House of Representatives requested that Universal Studios cancel the film's release. While this did not occur, the film was banned in several U.S. cities, protesters picketed outside movie theaters nationwide, dozens of petitions were circulated, and Blockbuster Video will not carry it to this day.

Finally, in 1989, the growing mistrust of art and artists by several government and religious leaders came to a head in several related events. Reverend Donald Wildmon of the National Federation for Decency, brought

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8Ibid., 339.

9Ibid., 341.

10H. Res. 517

Andres Serrano’s *Piss Christ*, a photograph of a crucifix submerged in urine, to the attention of the media and Congress. A grant from the National Endowment for the Arts had gone to a North Carolina-based arts center which re-granted some of the NEA funds to Serrano, thereby making him an indirect recipient of NEA money. At virtually the same time, the work of another photographer was also the target in the case of an exhibition called *Robert Mapplethorpe: The Perfect Moment*. The exhibition included a series of photographs showing, among less controversial subjects, sado-masochistic homosexual acts. The exhibit had been arranged by the Institute of Contemporary Art in Philadelphia, which had received $30,000 from the NEA expressly for defraying some of the $200,000 total costs for organizing and touring. The exhibit was scheduled to appear at the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, DC, but upon news of the Congressional concern over the controversial works, the Corcoran cancelled the engagement on very short notice. Their decision ignited a controversy so great that a new phrase was coined to describe associated attacks on art: The Culture Wars.

The exhibit eventually opened at the Washington Project for the Arts, but those in opposition to the exhibit wanted to make sure the associated parties would not receive government funds for such exhibits in the future. Senator Jesse Helms introduced an amendment to prevent the NEA from funding the “dissemination, promotion, or production of obscene or indecent materials or materials denigrating a particular religion.” The amendment did not pass.

These measures were not only initiated by conservative government
leaders, however. Artists and others who viewed the Corcoran’s decision as one of weakness and capitulation began to make their opinions clear as well. Several artists boycotted the Corcoran by canceling their own exhibitions. A New York City artist group refused to help the Corcoran organize an exhibit on censorship on the grounds that the Gallery had never publicly apologized for its action. By the end of 1989, six months after the scandal broke, Dr. Christina Orr-Cahall, the Corcoran’s director, resigned.

At the same time, the NEA was receiving its share of criticism from artists. Responding to a revoked grant for Witnesses: Against Our Vanishing, a New York exhibition about AIDS, composer Leonard Bernstein refused to accept the National Medal of Arts award. Elizabeth Sisco, a NEA Visual Arts Panel member resigned. The grant to Witness: Against Our Vanishing was eventually restored.

In 1990, the Culture Wars escalated. Robert Mapplethorpe: A Perfect Moment was scheduled to appear at the Contemporary Arts Center in Cincinnati. When it did, Director Dennis Barrie was personally indicted by the Cincinnati police for pandering obscenity. Surprisingly, U.S. Representative Dana Rohrabacher, who had been at the forefront of the anti-NEA movement, took the position that, “My focus has been the federal subsidization [of art], and I am not advocating that these actions be taken by local governments.” While Barrie was eventually cleared of charges, Rohrabacher’s words were not strong enough to prevent the setting of a precedent for local governments to look closely at their arts

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13Ibid., 352.
institutions' programming later in the decade.

In the same year, an anti-obscenity clause was written into the NEA "General Terms and Conditions for Grant Recipients" after extensive public debate. Recipients would have to agree to this clause in order to receive their grants. Many organizations, including The New York Shakespeare Festival, The New School, and the Paris Review, refused to sign and forfeited their awards.

It was also in 1990 that four performance artists were denied funding requested for separate projects though they had been recommended for grants by the NEA Theater Program review panel. At the time, only thirty-five of approximately 33,700 grants had ever been vetoed. Upon hearing that her grant had been denied, performance artist Karen Finley wrote, "I am being punished because I am a morally concerned Artist. We as a nation are now in our own era of blacklisting...." Finley and the other three artists, Holly Hughes, Tim Miller, and John Fleck, filed a law suit against the NEA and Frohnmayer charging violation of their constitutional rights "by denying them panel-approved grants for political reasons." After three years, the NEA Four, as they had become known, settled the suit and received the amount of their original revoked grants plus monetary damages.

The Culture Wars of the late 1980s and early 1990s may have been "won" for the time being by the artists and arts institutions, but these victories came at a

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15 Ibid., 20.
16 Brookman and Singer, 360.
price. Their opponents left a legacy of damage to the way arts are funded and treated in the United States. The National Endowment for the Arts' budget currently stands only slightly above the $94 million appropriated in 1977, a major cut in inflation-adjusted dollars, though in the last two years, there have been strong fights in both houses of Congress to increase the appropriation.\textsuperscript{17} In 1996, the Endowment's staff was reduced by forty-seven percent, and individual grants to solo performers, playwrights, and all other artists were eliminated. Of the direct, individual grants, only the Literature Fellowships have remained. General operating support was brought to an end in favor of project funding, and a significant portion of the NEA's annual allocation was diverted to state arts councils as block grants. Competitive categories no longer are based on artistic discipline but on four goal-based categories: Creation and Presentation; Heritage and Preservation; Education and Access; and Planning and Stabilization.

Jacob Weisberg, a writer for \textit{The New York Times Magazine}, describes the NEA as having been "neutered," which in the face of possible extinction was turned into "a kind of National Endowment for Arts and Crafts. The post-Mapplethorpe NEA is afraid of art."\textsuperscript{18} This is one reason why, in recent years, the occasional cultural battle has appeared not on the national landscape, but locally. With more money proportionally for the arts coming from state and local agencies, microcosmic culture wars have begun to appear around the country. Even the big, left-leaning arts metropolises are not immune. Notably, in September of 1999, the Brooklyn Museum of Art was attacked for displaying a

\textsuperscript{17}The National Endowment for the Arts, 26.

painting of the Virgin Mary that incorporated clumps of elephant dung. Despite the explanations by the artist, Chris Ofili, that the dung is commonly used in African art as a symbol of veneration, Mayor Rudolph Giuliani criticized the museum and initiated a law suit in order to revoke all city funds to the institution unless the painting was removed. The museum won when a judge ruled that the city was in danger of violating the first amendment.

Arts organizations will continue to win legal challenges when the First Amendment is at issue. But, they must recognize that winning involves sacrifice and damage to artistic principles. In order to preserve their freedom of expression, arts organizations may have to forfeit financial, physical or human resources, reputation, or programming. Like the Brooklyn Museum of Art, their internal workings may be closely scrutinized in the media. The following chapters will present, through case histories of three productions of the play Angels in America, some of the ways a work of art can be attacked and explore the different problems an institution under attack might face.

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CHAPTER 3

AN OUNCE OF PREVENTION: THE CASE OF CHARLOTTE REPERTORY THEATRE

On March 20, 1996, Angels in America opened at the North Carolina Blumenthal Performing Arts Center, in space leased by Charlotte Repertory Theatre (Charlotte Rep) for their performances. The lease contained a clause that allowed the Performing Arts Center to evict Charlotte Rep should they violate the law. This clause nearly led to the closing of the play on opening night. North Carolina law prohibits indecent exposure, and the first part of Angels in America contains seven seconds of full-frontal nudity during a scene in which Prior is examined by his doctor. Keith Martin, the theater’s artistic director had to obtain a court order preventing the Performing Arts Center, or any other party, from canceling Angels.

The play opened to a sold-out crowd, while Charlotteans, both for and against the production, protested outside. One person who opposed the production said, "For me, it’s a tax issue. This country is $5 trillion in debt, and our tax dollars shouldn’t be used to support this."1 Another felt the play was

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1Harvey Burgess, “Play goes on in Charlotte,” The Herald (Rock Hill, SC), 6A.

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offensive because she believed, "It promotes homosexuality and nudity." On the other side of the protests, those who supported the production did so in defense of artistic diversity so they could choose what they did or did not want to view. "I want to live in a city where I am free to see whatever kind of production I want to see," said one woman. Others simply drew attention to what they saw as banal, as did a man who carried a sign reading "Move along, it's just a penis."

The controversy began despite the fact that Charlotte Rep had taken great pains to prevent or minimize potential problems. The issue that this case raises is that controversy can occur even when a theater employs the most careful and thought-out preventative measures. Charlotte Rep's efforts to inform the public about the play were simultaneously a curse and a blessing. While ticket buyers were prepared for the production, the wealth of information on Angels also reached those who found it offensive. One of those people was Reverend Joseph R. Chambers, whose previous religiously inspired crusades included fights against the PBS children's show Barney and Friends and Disney's hit film The Lion King. He got the support of several local politicians and, citing the state's obscenity laws, attempted to close the play on those grounds. The North Carolina obscenity law, however, exempts works of "intrinsic artistic or literary

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3Burgess.

4Speizer.

merit,” so *Angels* was protected.

Chambers’ next tactic was to convince the local government that the statute prohibiting public nudity, separate from the obscenity law, should be upheld and enforced in the case of this play. The District Attorney’s office agreed, which got the attention of the Blumenthal Performing Arts Center. First, the Center attempted to convince Charlotte Rep to alter the scene so that the naked actor would turn away from the audience or remain partially clothed, but the theater refused to alter the script. The Performing Arts Center threatened to break the lease just hours before the play was to open, so Charlotte Rep had attorney Bill Diehl secure a temporary restraining order from Mecklenburg County Superior Court Judge Marvin Gray. “The play is an artistic presentation,” the judge wrote in his ruling. “Nudity... in the play appears to constitute artistic expression.” Hence the play was allowed to go on to present its run to sold-out crowds and an extension to accommodate greater-than-usual attendance.

The following year, after Charlotte Rep staged *Six Degrees of Separation*, another play with homosexual content but no nudity, the Mecklenberg County Commissioners lashed back. A majority of commissioners voted to pass a resolution that would deny county funding to projects that “promote, advocate, or endorse behaviors, lifestyles and values that seek to undermine and deviate

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*Quoted in “An uproar in Charlotte streets greets a play about gays, AIDS,” *The Atlanta Constitution*, 22 March 1996, 1C.*

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from the value and societal role of the traditional American family.”

As a result, $2.5 million dollars were cut from the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Arts and Science Council’s $11 million budget. The commissioners also granted themselves veto power on any project the Council approved.

Long before Charlotte Repertory Theatre’s production of *Angels in America* was almost shut down, the theater’s staff had taken great pains to prevent such actions. Keith Martin and Steve Umberger, the producing and artistic directors, devised a plan to build both internal and external consensus in support of staging the play. Although *Angels* had been staged without much ado on Broadway and in thirty-eight cities on its premier national tour, in addition to five regional productions, Martin and Umberger recognized the play might easily be considered objectionable in a conservative city like Charlotte and, that in staging such a play, the theater was confronting several challenges. At stake were the theater’s earned and contributed income, public image, reputation, the trust of its audiences, and the public’s reception of the play as a work of art.

Taking a step-by-step approach, Martin and Umberger worked to build consensus within the company, gaining the support of board members and staff. More than a year before the board approved the play, board and staff were given an active role in determining if it should be considered at all for inclusion in an upcoming season. “The diversity of opinions brought to those deliberations helped prepare us for the controversy,” Martin would later write. “There was not a single battle fought, position argued, or issue debated that wasn’t first

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encountered by the committee charged with play selection.”

In debating whether or not to stage *Angels*, the play selection committee considered many factors. According to Martin's *Stage Directions* article, “Consent and Advise,” on the theater’s prevention tactics, Charlotte Rep was careful to situate *Angels* among a season of carefully selected plays that would create the least amount of financial hardship to the theater. The committee considered other plays that might be produced in the same season, opting for less provocative works and those by popular playwrights such as Neil Simon’s *Laughter on the 23rd Floor* and Edward Albee’s *Three Tall Women*. Several of the other shows were small in scale and required minimal resources, allowing *Angels* to have the large budget it needed.

Additionally, the play selection committee worked with the budget committee to create financial projections for each show and decided that five of the season’s plays would be co-produced with other theaters to reduce costs. After becoming involved, the budget committee, like the play selection committee, was able to make an informed judgement on *Angels*, based on their projections and strategies for keeping costs low. Having the support of the budget committee increased the overall board support necessary for approval. The members of both the budget and play selection committees helped build consensus among the rest of the board.

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8Keith Martin, “Consent and Advise,” *Stage Directions*, June/July 1997, 17. This article was the primary source of reference for this case. It is one of several articles in the June/July 1997 issue of *Stage Directions* on Charlotte Repertory Theatre’s production of *Angels in America*, as well as general articles on managing controversy.

9Ibid.
Finally, the play selection committee presented their proposal to the full board, and they discussed all the possible reactions the play might encounter. A majority of the board approved the play which made the decision official. Two board members who opposed the decision resigned.

Martin’s article goes on to explain that having won strong support from most of their board, the theater now faced the task of educating the public. The theater acknowledged that the play was not for everyone. They took pains to ensure their subscribers remained happy by allowing them to exchange their *Angels* tickets for additional tickets to *Laughter on the 23rd Floor* if they chose. Group sales to schools were restricted to colleges and universities unless parental consent had been obtained. All advertising, direct mail, and other printed matter warned potential audiences of the adult language, sexual content, and nudity, and recommended the play for audiences eighteen years of age and over. Signage was placed in the box office and theater lobby with similar warnings, and house management and ushers were instructed to check with patrons with small children each night to make sure the parents knew what the play would be like.

Education and outreach programs were created that focused on the themes of the play and the issues raised by those themes. Workshops were held on the play’s spiritual themes and on living with AIDS. The actors and production team spoke about their perspectives on a panel, and the theater created an award to honor “individuals and organizations for their contribution
to HIV/AIDS education, awareness, and support.” These efforts were led by Charlotte Rep's marketing department as “preventive maintenance for our audience.” Their goal was to strategically gain support for Angels from subscribers and other potential ticket buyers. Knowing that all of the above efforts might not be enough to prevent or minimize a controversy, the theater also consulted the North Carolina Volunteer Lawyers for the Arts and American Civil Liberties Union chapters. These groups offered to provide advice in the event of a legal battle.

A point of contention among arts controversies is often that of public funding supporting material some might find objectionable. Therefore, Charlotte Repertory Theater utilized specific tactics to protect the theater and their funders. The theater solicited corporate sponsorships for other productions in the season line-up, not for Angels. However, they informed the sponsors that Angels would be produced and that there was potential for controversy.

When Charlotte Rep applied for funding from local and state arts councils, they made their grant requests higher than usual and higher than they knew they could expect from each source; therefore, when grants came in below requested levels, the theater could say only a corresponding percentage of their season was supported by government funds. Additionally, the theater did not list Angels as one of the productions that received those funds, and the arts councils were asked to do the same in their own literature. On the state level, this tactic was a success. Unfortunately, the Arts and Science Council did not fare so well, losing

\[\text{Ibid, 18.}\]
\[\text{Ibid.}\]
a quarter of their budget for providing any funds to the theater at all.

The $2.5 million cut to the Arts and Science Council had repercussions for many nonprofit organizations in Charlotte. The Discovery Place Science Museum, which used to allow children to enter for free, began assessing a charge. The Nutcracker was performed by N.C. Dance Theatre to taped music rather than a live orchestra. An opera workshop for minority students was cancelled. In 1998, the same cut was made, resulting in a cumulative $5 million loss to the agency and its recipients. But, following the November 1998 election, three of the five commissioners who voted for the cuts were replaced, and a fourth did not run for re-election. In February 1999, the new commission voted to repeal the resolution that had disallowed funding to groups that support homosexuality, and they restored city funding to the Council.

In spite of the controversy and major funding cuts to Charlotte arts organizations, Charlotte Repertory Theatre was able to successfully sustain their operations due to a strong show of support by those individuals, corporations and agencies that lauded the theater for presenting a daring work and standing up to the opposition. Sales increased fifty percent over two seasons. Corporate sponsors renewed at a rate of one-hundred percent. The state legislature made a special $100,000 grant to the theater. The two board members who left their posts early have continued to support the theater in other ways. Most importantly, the incident brought the theater name recognition and a reputation for integrity among supporters. "That one show has given clarity to our agency

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and allowed us to differentiate our productions from those of the other theaters in the marketplace," according to Keith Martin.\textsuperscript{14}

There have been no serious changes in policy at Charlotte Rep with regard to board, staff or programming. However, there has been a "lingering effect," according to Martin, on the theater's public relations efforts. He elaborates:

We have now produced fifty different plays since our March to May 1996 donnybrook with Angels, yet it remains the one and, unfortunately, only production by which we continue to be identified. My biggest challenge these days is to position Charlotte Rep in the larger context of our work... 40,000 annual student contacts through our education programs, outreach initiatives to...under-served members of our community, a literary department that develops over half a dozen new works each season, etc.\textsuperscript{15}

Based on the specific problems they faced during the controversy, Keith Martin and Steven Umberger were able to determine what actions they should have implemented early on to try to prevent those specific problems. For example, by not taking into account the possibility of involvement by the county, they neglected to meet with county officials to discuss the theater's mission and contributions to Charlotte's economy and quality of life. Today, the theater practices arts advocacy by informing county officials and other civic leaders when they are considering controversial plays for production. The theater reiterates its mission and articulates how the play under consideration relates to that mission. Steve Umberger believes that honoring your theater's mission "will lead you through whatever is dished out to you."\textsuperscript{16} While it may not keep a controversy from occurring, a strong belief in the mission can keep morale high

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\textsuperscript{14}Keith Martin, Charlotte, to the author, Washington DC, 3 July 2000, by electronic mail.

\textsuperscript{15}Ibid.

\textsuperscript{16}Martin, "Consent and Advise," 20.
and remind those involved what they are defending.

Other measures they've incorporated since the controversy that might have been helpful when planning for Angels include writing a fact sheet on the production in question and developing a strategy for working with the media. The fact sheet summarizes the play and lists those aspects that may be considered controversial. It also describes the theater's plan for educating the community about the play. With the media strategy plan in place, the theater works with the media to determine what the level of access will be to those affiliated with the production, who the spokesperson is for the show, and to address other expectations the media may have. Finally, the theater practices damage control by keeping their board apprised of any important situations as they occur through a phone chain or broadcast fax.

This case exemplifies how “even the best laid plans of mice and men oft go astray.” The management of Charlotte Repertory Theatre took steps to alert the potential audiences and the general public of the themes in Angels in America. They allowed subscribers to opt out of attending the production without penalty. They considered budgetary and fundraising issues. Still, the outcomes of the controversy could not have been predicted.
CHAPTER 4

MISSIONS AT ODDS: THE CASE OF CATHOLIC
UNIVERSITY OF AMERICA

Catholic University of America's Drama Department aims to "bring to the art of the theatre a high artistic and ethical purpose."¹ To that end, it brings theater students, including actors, directors, designers, playwrights and dramaturgs, together in an environment where they can collaborate on productions of classical and contemporary plays while engaging in critical theater studies. Students interested in directing are given the opportunity to mount a production for the regular season of plays that are open to the campus and greater public.

In 1994, when graduate student Christopher Beilis began his program of study, the drama department asked him to compile a list of plays he would like to direct in partial fulfillment of the requirements for his M.F.A. in Performance Studies. Two years later a committee of drama faculty responsible for play selection voted unanimously for Beilis's selection of Angels in America, Part One: Millennium Approaches. That spring, the mainstage season for 1996-97 was announced, and Angels was to open a season that also included plays by Anton


The selection of Angels for the main-stage season was announced at the end of the school year, and that summer Provost Msgr. John Wippel called drama department chair Gitta Honegger to express some concern, according to Honegger, over the possibility of “advocacy of homosexuality in the play.” However, Wippel and Dean of Arts & Sciences Antanas Suziedelis initially made no public statement clarifying the reason Honegger gave for their trepidation. The Tower, Catholic University’s student newspaper, reported that the provost, when “asked to cite specific problems with the play,... said he found none.” Instead, he and Wippel turned the interview’s focus toward the issue of public versus academic performances. “Some plays are suitable for the public; some have to be done internally,” Suziedelis said. University president Patrick Ellis, when asked how he felt about the play, expressed displeasure with its frequent use of foul language. He acknowledged that the play “elicits compassion,” but in the end he deferred to the judgment of the dean and the provost. Later, the university issued a statement on their position, but remained vague about specific aspects of the play that it opposed. The statement said that the play’s

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2Elizabeth White and Jenn Adach, “Angels in America Moves Off Campus,” The Tower (Catholic University’s student newspaper), 27 September 1996.


4Ibid.

5Ibid.
"underlying philosophy" was at odds with the university's mission.6

Torn between academic freedom and the university's obligation to uphold specific concepts of Christian values, the administration agreed to allow the production to go on as an "academic exercise" rather than a main-stage show open to the local community – a distinction for which there was no precedence on campus. The administration argued that producing a play about homosexuality and opening it to the public would indicate an endorsement of homosexuality by the university. They believed the distinction between producing the play in a strictly academic setting rather than for public consumption was a fair compromise. To keep the play within the academic context they deemed appropriate for it, the administration banned advertising for the production. Additionally, they mandated that admission could not be charged for the performances as was normally the case with main-stage shows. What the university did not count on, was that The Tower staff would learn of the situation and report on it, generating free, indirect advertising.

On September 6th, an article titled "University Bans Angels’ Advertising" ran on The Tower's front page. Suddenly, everyone on campus knew about the controversial play. The administration's plan for no advertising had backfired. Bellis wrote a letter to The Tower's editor suggesting that the administration allow advertising with the condition that all publicity materials clearly indicate the mature nature of the play and that "the views expressed in the play are not

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6White and Adach, "Angels in America Moves Off Campus."
necessarily those held by the university or the Catholic Church." Bellis's suggestions were not followed. Instead, the administration took an entirely different approach: they declared that only graduate students and faculty, not undergraduates, could attend the performances. Students would be required to show identification at the door to enforce the new policy.

Furious, Bellis and department chair Honegger voiced their opposition to this new attempt at keeping people away from the production. Suziedelis called a meeting of the drama department faculty and made clear to them that the administration would not back down from an imposed age restriction. If the department was unhappy with that, they had two options: cancel the production or move it off campus. Honegger knew it would be extremely difficult, only three weeks before opening, to relocate the production. Sets had already been built to the specifications of the Hartke Theatre on campus, and theaters around the Washington, DC, area are generally booked in October. Following the meeting, Honegger agreed to limit attendance to certain groups, but Suziedelis encouraged her to give further consideration to the other option.

In a meeting, she asked the cast how they felt. They unanimously voted in favor of a move, in spite of its complications. They wanted as many people as possible to be able to see the product of their hard work. Honegger contacted the artistic director of Arena Stage, explained the situation, and within the hour she had secured Arena's Old Vat Theater for Angels in America, one-third the size of the Hartke, but free from university restrictions and carrying with it excellent

7Christopher L. Bellis, "Ban on Play Advertisement Unjustified," The Tower, 13 September 1996.
name recognition.

The first part of *Angels in America* played for eight sold-out nights at Arena Stage. In *The Tower*, the production review suggested that the move to Arena actually enhanced the play, making the audience experience more intimate since the Old Vat Theatre is considerably smaller than Catholic University’s Hartke Theatre. The reviewer gave high praise to the actors and Beilis’s direction. No letters to the editor or alternative review appeared in *The Tower* to criticize the play’s subject matter or this particular production.

Catholic University was faced with a conflict between their obligation to uphold the values of the Catholic Church as it saw them, and also allow the drama department to meet the needs of its students in a free speech culture. There had been no precedent set by other controversial plays on campus, and since *Angels* is not taught in the classroom, there was no earlier religious opposition to it. The administration feared that presenting a play with a subject not looked on upon favorably in the Catholic faith would imply endorsement by the school. They were unwilling to take that risk, but they had to treat the situation gingerly. They could not afford to look too close-minded on the subject either. By limiting the practices normally associated with the university’s theatrical productions, such as advertising and charging admission, the administration believed they could prevent school endorsement of the production as a theatrical event while allowing Beilis to do the work which the drama department had already approved.

Beilis felt strongly that this attempt at compromise was unfair and censorious, so he wrote a letter to *The Tower* shortly after the ban on advertising
was announced. In the letter that appeared in the student newspaper, Bellis pointed out that "all voices should be heard and their ideas discussed, not necessarily as options on how we personally should live our lives, but as ideas and perceptions which make up the society in which we live."\(^8\)

Bellis also sent a letter to Dean Suziedelis. In the reply, according to Bellis, "He questioned my judgment in selecting [Angels] as my thesis project."\(^9\) In calling Bellis's judgment into question, Suziedelis also implicated the Drama Department for approving the production. While Honegger felt this implication to be a particularly difficult aspect of the situation, she still understood both sides of the issue. "As an artist you always want to share what you’re doing with everyone... [but] as a faculty member at this university, I have to be ready to understand the stand of the church. It is the Catholic University."\(^10\)

The university's position was simply that the play, as an academic exercise for the students involved, could be staged for those faculty who needed to view it in order judge the students' work, and at the same time keep students and the general public away. Once the ban on advertising had an adverse effect as a result of press coverage on campus, the school attempted to limit attendance only to graduate students and faculty. The statement released by the university reinforced the administration's "right to determine the appropriateness of public presentations to insure consistency with the university's mission."\(^11\)

\(^{8}\)Ibid.

\(^{9}\)White and Adach, "Angels in America Moves Off Campus."

\(^{10}\)Elizabeth White and Jenn Adach, "University Bans Angels Advertising."

\(^{11}\)White and Adach, "Angels in America Moves Off Campus."
Immediately, The Tower came out with an opinion piece citing what its editors felt was hypocritical about the administration’s decision to keep undergraduates away. In an editorial, the paper asked, “Why are graduate students deemed more mature than undergraduate students? Is the university’s mission only applicable to undergraduates?” The editorial also criticized the school for waiting so long to take action against the production and pushing for it to move off campus so close to opening.

While the university’s age-restrictive tactic was hypocritical, their motives were sound, or at least consistent with existing principles of the institution. The university’s mission states, in part:

Faithful to the Christian message as it comes through the Church and faithful to its own national traditions, The Catholic University of America has unique responsibilities to be of service to Christian thought and education in the Catholic community as well as to serve the nation and the world.13

Within that community, homosexuality is acknowledged as a reality, but it is not endorsed. In addition to homosexuality, the play also presents characterizations of a Heaven that looks like San Francisco, a God who has abandoned humanity, and angels who copulate incessantly. As the only university in the United States chartered by the Vatican, Catholic University of America had to act in accordance with its institutional voice. Opening the play to the public and charging admission could have been construed not only as an endorsement of the university, but implicating that of the Pope and the Catholic Church as well.

Catholic University had to fulfill their responsibility “to be of service to

13The full text of Catholic University’s mission appears in appendix A.
Christian thought," yet the student body is religiously mixed. There are also gay students on campus. One gay, Catholic man wrote a letter to The Tower expressing his dismay at the University's attempt to keep students from seeing the play, explaining that he chose to attend Catholic University "with the assurance that the Church's doctrine would not unduly influence the content of the education." The editorial staff of The Tower raised its own issues during the controversy: "If the university will restrict an academic play, what ramifications will such restrictions have for future discourse in classrooms all over campus?" With a mixed student body the administration was unable to please every group on campus. They kept changing their decisions and exacerbated the conflict.

Angels in America found itself caught between academic freedom and the Catholic Church.

The catechism of the Catholic Church, paragraph 2358, reads:

The number of men and women who have deep-seated homosexual tendencies is not negligible. They do not choose their homosexual condition; for most of them it is a trial. They must be accepted with respect, compassion, and sensitivity. Every sign of unjust discrimination in their regard should be avoided. These persons are called to fulfill God's will in their lives and, if they are Christians, to unite to the sacrifice of the Lord's Cross the difficulties they may encounter from their condition.

Though the catechism assumes all homosexual people suffer, it does emphasize compassion and non-discrimination. However, if the university had taken into consideration the issue of institutional voice, they would have found a discrepancy between the catechism and the position of the Vatican. The Vatican has continually denounced homosexuality, and, as recently as July 2000, the Pope

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15"Walking a Tightrope."
spoke out in protest of a gay-rights march that took place in Rome. Perhaps the university's hypocritical actions followed from those of higher authorities.

The university concerned themselves only with Christian doctrine and the students involved in the play. They neglected to consider the school's entire student population which is religiously diverse among all faiths, not just denominations of Christianity. And, the school has both straight and gay students. Why weren't the rights of all students considered in the discussions? Homosexuality may be a controversial issue, but that does not mean it should be left out of classrooms at an institution of higher learning.

By relocating the production, the school sent a contradictory message that they did not endorse the contents of the play but supported one of their student's right to direct it as an academic exercise. However, the university still financed the production, including the expense of moving it off campus, and students' work on the play counted toward requirements for Catholic University degrees. Therefore, there was still a strong affiliation between the production and the university. In this author's opinion, changing the physical location of the production did not do enough to dissociate the university from it. They couldn't please any one group fully, so they attempted to please them all. A firmer stance would have been to choose a definitive position and let their actions follow from it. Better yet, the university should have acknowledged their diverse student body by allowing the play to go on as planned and the issue of homosexuality to be brought to the fore for formal and informal discussions on campus.
CHAPTER 5

A PERSONAL ATTACK: THE CASE OF KILGORE COLLEGE

Raymond Caldwell, director of the drama department at Kilgore College, a privately funded community college in East Texas, usually chose older plays for his student actors to appear in. To him, contemporary plays seemed to have too much foul language, nudity, or controversial issues, all at which were at odds with the college’s conservative, religious community. But in September 1999, Caldwell decided to go forward with Angels in America, Part One: Millennium Approaches, a play that features many volatile elements. “Theater is supposed to challenge platitudes,” he said. “It’s supposed to disturb the status quo....”

Aware of the opposition he might face, Caldwell notified students, parents, and the college’s administration of his intent to produce the play. He cut from the script a sex scene between two men and the scene in which Prior fully undresses, as well as foul language to soften some of the controversial elements of the script. Warnings appeared on audition posters, and the theater students who planned to audition were encouraged to discuss the script with their families.

Two weeks prior to opening night, Caldwell notified the college’s

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president, Dr. William Holda, asking his support in case of any complaints.

Caldwell had taken a couple of risks previously, staging *Equus* and *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*, without any problems, so Holda didn’t worry about it. However, when he eventually read the play, he realized just how controversial its contents were. By then Donald Bebee, pastor of a local Baptist church had heard about the upcoming production and was on the phone to Caldwell to learn more about the play.

Bebee requested a copy of the script, and, upon reading it, wrote a letter to the editor of the town newspaper, the *Kilgore News Herald*, reprimanding Caldwell for exposing students to foul language and homosexual situations. He criticized the student actors for ignoring community values and charged the college with promoting a gay lifestyle. He also suggested, “If our tax dollars are so carelessly being used without consideration to the affect [sic] and offense toward the people in the community, perhaps it is time to consider withdrawing support for additional activities such as the Shakespeare Festival in which the drama department at Kilgore College engages.”² He further encouraged the newspaper’s readers to start petition campaigns against the production and to express their displeasure to city, county, and college leaders. On the same day that Bebee’s letter appeared, the *News Herald* editor, Dave Kucifer, wrote an editorial against the production, though he had not actually read the play. His position was based upon Bebee’s comments about the script. Shortly afterward, the offices of Caldwell and Holda were barraged by phone calls from angry

²Ibid.
citizens, while others signed petitions in protest. Many accused Caldwell of being gay (though he is not) and promoting a homosexual lifestyle to students. He received more than one communication wishing him death from AIDS.

The Gregg County Commissioners received phone calls as well. As a result, they began to comment to the press that they were considering revoking a $50,000 one-time pledge to the financially troubled Texas Shakespeare Festival. The Festival is run by Caldwell and held each summer on Kilgore College's campus. It had been struggling financially for a few years, and, by a 3-2 vote in 1999, the Commissioners agreed to help out. However, after the news of Angels, the Commissioners unanimously agreed to rescind the $50,000 pledge if the production were to go on.

Holda refused to bow to the pressures of the local community, but he did take precautions in case of any problems caused by protesters. When opening night arrived, every door to the theater, except the front door, was locked. Halls and bathrooms were searched for anything suspicious, and the student actors were told to remain locked in their dressing rooms until curtain. Metal detectors were set up at the entrance, and all audience members were required to pass through them. Video cameras monitored the audience during the show, while Caldwell remained ready backstage to cue the cast and crew to leave the stage area immediately in case of trouble in the house. Though the production's critics spread rumors through town that two of the male actors would be naked and having sex on stage, Caldwell had long before toned down the language and cut the racier scenes in the play, including one with simulated anal sex.

There were approximately 30 protesters outside the school on opening
night; they were not permitted on campus. By the third night, though, "the picketers had disappeared and Caldwell appeared to have held his own against his detractors."³ The protests against the play generated a great deal of publicity for the production, and many townspeople who supported the production brought their older children to see it, including Holda, who attended with his two teenagers. At the end of the show "many audience members... rose to their feet and broke into thunderous applause."⁴

Unfortunately for the drama department, any sense of victory they might have felt, was soon squashed by the county commissioners' decision to withdraw the county's $50,000 pledge to the Texas Shakespeare Festival in October 1999. The college and the press believed the withdrawal to be in response to the Angels production the County Commission had so opposed and a fulfillment of Donald Bebee's wish that such punishment be invoked.

The funding cut to the Festival came after many problems for Holda, Kilgore's president. "I was the target because the final decision really rested with me. [And,] although the college board could have met to cancel the play, I was able to keep that from happening."

His earliest problems were institutional. Several trustees wanted the board president to call a special meeting so they could discuss and vote on blocking the

³Ibid.
⁴Ibid.
⁵William Holda, Indiana, to the author, Washington DC, 26 June 2000, by electronic mail.
play from opening, but over a two-day period Holda met individually with each board member in order to explain his viewpoint on key issues. He felt strongly that if the board were to take action against the production, they would be micromanaging the college's curriculum. Additionally, they would be setting a precedent for outside groups to influence changes to the curriculum. The board president sided with Holda and would not call a meeting, even though he did not condone the production. In the opinion of board member Randall Brint, had the meeting occurred, there would probably have been an unanimous vote to stop the production.6

Another issue at stake was the college's accreditation, due for review that December by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools. The Association's standards of academic freedom would have been violated had the play been cancelled, and Kilgore's accreditation would have been jeopardized. The result would have been loss of U.S. Government Pell Grant eligibility to students and the denial of credits from the college to be transferable to other schools.7

Holda also faced the task of protecting the college's major gifts campaign. David Wylie, development director at Kilgore, told the campus newspaper, "Some money that was pledged has been canceled, and we have heard of others who had planned to pledge and decided not to."8 Holda felt that if donors were

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6 Greenwood.
7 Brad Rollins, "For Holda, 'It's been very tough,'" Kilgore College Flare, 15 October 1999.
no longer willing to give, that was their prerogative. "I would rather them not
give and have a clear conscience, and we not take the money with strings
attached and have a clear conscience ourselves."9 While one campaign
committee member resigned over the controversy, many donors let Holda know
they would support the institution in spite of Angels in America or because of his
defense of freedom of speech. The campus newspaper reported that "letters and
e-mails have been sent to [Kilgore College] from people saying they will support
the campaign, even if the play causes problems."10

Holda had stepped up his role in spearheading the fundraising campaign
to minimize damage to the college’s image that resulted from the angry pressure
from the religious right-wing constituency against Kilgore College in Sunday
sermons and through the media. In one instance, a foundation that had been
funding the college for 40 years threatened to withhold a $500,000 grant that had
been pledged. Only after Holda met individually with each of the foundation’s
trustees were the funds transferred to the college.

In addition to the college-related problems, extremists of the religious
community slandered Holda. Protesters from Kilgore and nearby towns of
Lindale and Mount Enterprise came to campus with signs, flyers, and press
releases. While some continued to voice their opposition to Angels’ content,
others attacked Holda personally. One Lindale group drove in on a bus
bearing a sign that read “Dr. Holda – How evil to blaspheme the Savior’s name,

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9Ibid.
10Ibid.

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calling it art!”11

The protests extended beyond the campus as well. Holda had been a well-respected resident of Kilgore since 1975, when he began teaching music at the College. An ordained Catholic deacon, he plays organ at one church in town and is the choir director for another. However, Holda is considered “an intellectual and something of an anomaly in a town where religion and politics often lean toward the right.”12 Some of the more religious townspeople saw Holda as a purveyor of homosexuality. The same group that had driven the bus through campus parked outside the church where Holda leads the choir, displaying a new slogan: “HELLP [sic], GOV. BUSH, CALL THE POLICE!! DR. HOLDA & HIS SEWER-SUCKING SODOMITES AT K.C. HAVE RAPED AND SODOMIZED THE VIRGIN VILLAGE OF KILGORE, TX.”13 While the church issued a statement in support of Holda, his problems continued. His son was harassed at school, and Holda had to install separate phone and e-mail lines in his office to handle the influx of messages from supporters and protesters.

When the Gregg County Commissioners withdrew their $50,000 grant from the Texas Shakespeare Festival, Holda wrote an open letter that circulated through Kilgore and on the Internet. He urged those who read his letter to use the Internet to publicize the actions of the county, publicize the loss of the funding, and to refer to the college the names of any funding sources that might

11Greenwood.
12Greenwood.
13Ibid.
make up the loss, or to refer the college to those sources.\textsuperscript{14}

Holda's letter found its way to the national media, and publications such as *The Nation*, *Backstage*, and *The Chronicle of Higher Education* wrote about the events in Kilgore, Texas. As more people became aware of the funding loss to the Festival, checks began to arrive at Kilgore College, for as little as $5 or as much as $10,000 from The Dramatists Guild of America. The groups that so vehemently protested *Angels in America* and supported punitive measures against the college were silent when money began to come in for the Texas Shakespeare Festival. Holda had predicted their disinterest during the controversy: "when they are tired of it they go on about their business. And we are left to pick up the pieces."\textsuperscript{15}

In addition to the gifts that poured in as a result of Holda's open letter, he was awarded the 2000 PEN/Newman's Own First Amendment Award. The award was founded in 1992 by actor Paul Newman and A.E. Hotchner of Newman's Own to "honor individuals who, in the face of adversity, champion the First Amendment right to freedom of expression as it affects the written word."\textsuperscript{16} Tony Kushner personally presented Holda with a cash award of $25,000 for the Texas Shakespeare Festival.

When he received the award, Holda asked,

...why is there this tremendous fear of something so simple as a word? Why this fear and hysteria over the words of playwright Tony Kushner? Why

\textsuperscript{14}The full text of Dr. Holda's letter appears in Appendix B.

\textsuperscript{15}Rollins.

are writers all over the world imprisoned because of their words? Because words have power – they give flesh and life to ideas which may challenge our most deeply held beliefs. They may hold up a mirror, reflecting life as it really is, in spite of our denial. And only after withstanding the crucible of a viciously powerful challenge are our ideas truly worthy of ownership.\textsuperscript{17}

This year, Holda received an additional, unprecedented gift: Newman and Hotchner personally donated $18,000 to the festival in addition to the $25,000 award. With the local donations and the PEN/Newman's Own money, the $50,000 loss from Kilgore Country had been made up for and exceeded.

Internally, the school is still recovering from the controversy. According to Holda, “The composition of the college board has not changed since the controversy; however, they have not totally recovered....”\textsuperscript{18} While most of the board has let go of the volatile issue, Holda characterizes the overall sentiment of board this way: “the open wound has healed; the scar still remains.”\textsuperscript{19}

As for the college's major gifts campaign, one campaign committee member resigned, and the time-table had to be extended. However, the development director remained unfazed and began to plan an endowment campaign for the Texas Shakespeare Festival with a $5 million goal. Caldwell feels $5 million is a bit far-reaching in light of the Angels controversy. That controversy has given Caldwell a new perspective on his career and community. He believes the festival would fare better in central Texas. “With its larger population and less conservative attitudes, [it] may be a more nourishing

\textsuperscript{17}Ibid.

\textsuperscript{18}William Holda, Indiana, to the author, Washington DC, 26 June 2000, by electronic mail.

\textsuperscript{19}William Holda, Kilgore, to the author, Washington DC, 12 July 2000, by electronic mail.
environment."²⁰ If the festival were to move, Caldwell would go with it and give up teaching drama at Kilgore College. In an interview with *The Houston Press*, he expressed a sense of feeling constrained. "You can’t expose students to worlds they’re not familiar with and restrict yourself to reflect the community you’re in. I have to leave if necessary and go do what my calling is."²¹

For Kilgore College, there have been pros and cons as a result of the controversy. While the school has received significant national press and a positive reputation nationally, the local community still feels negatively toward the school. Conservative, religious individuals have either withheld contributions from the college, or have been reluctant to support the Texas Shakespeare Festival, while others still make negative comments about Caldwell and/or the school’s theater programs. While enrollment has not gone down, there has been a loss of major gifts and what Holda calls “a very obvious awkwardness” between the college and the Kilgore community. But, he is quick to point out, “At the same time, there are those in the community who applaud and cheer the stance we took.”²²

In spite of the personal attacks on Holda and Caldwell and the damage to the major gifts campaign, Kilgore College and the Texas Shakespeare Festival continue to thrive. There is rebuilding of relationships that will require the College’s attention in the months and years to come, but the case serves as a

²⁰Greenwood.
²¹Ibid.
reminder of how a controversy can shift and evolve. Kilgore College’s controversy was characterized by dueling stakeholders with conflicting agendas and Holda’s vehement defense of the academic freedom and the First Amendment.
CHAPTER 6

LESSONS LEARNED

Controversy can affect an institution in positive and negative ways that range from increased publicity and name recognition to exhausted human resources or a tarnished reputation. When considering a play for production that is or could become controversial, a theater must take into account the play’s relevance to the theater’s mission, stakeholders’ possible reactions, and what financial and human resources are available to deal with all possible outcomes.

For 18 months in advance of its production of *Angels in America*, Charlotte Repertory Theatre carefully planned and executed a series of tactics to develop the consensus of the theater’s staff and board in support of staging *Angels in America*. The management fully disclosed information about the play to subscribers and potential audiences, and devised effective strategies to maintain funding from foundation and corporate sources. In spite of their efforts, religious groups and some county officials did what they could to mobilize opposition to the production.

At Catholic University, administrators faced a “lose-lose” situation. The University would have been criticized by some Catholics if it aligned itself with a controversial play dealing largely with homosexuality, and it would have been criticized by more liberal groups for not allowing the play to go on as planned.
Unable to uphold the values of the Catholic Church while maintaining total academic freedom, they attempted to reach a compromise, only to find they were being charged with hypocrisy by on- and off-campus press. Annamarie DeCarlo, a university spokeswoman, stated, "We're not banning it, we just don't want it to be produced on campus."¹

At Kilgore College, those who opposed the drama department's production of *Angels* criticized department chair Raymond Caldwell, but their primary target was the college's president, Dr. William Holda. "People who perceive that I made this evil decision don't realize that I didn't make a decision at all," said Holda.² Caldwell had the authority to make the decision about whether or not to produce the play, and Holda had the power to override it. He didn't. The buck stopped with him, and many did not like that he backed Caldwell. Yet, others revered him. He even received a major award for upholding academic freedom, but the college's reputation has changed.

Each case presented in this thesis demonstrates the different shapes controversy can take, how institutions may respond, and how they may be affected. Of course, once a public controversy begins, neither side can completely control the controversy's course. However, there are some lessons that can be taken from the three cases in this thesis that are valuable to theaters and other organizations who may present potentially controversial works of art.

1. Previous productions with potential for controversy or similar issues of


²Brad Rollins, "For Holda, 'it's been very tough,'" *Kilgore College Flare*, 15 October 1999.
sensitivity are not necessarily good indicators of how another production will fare. The Actors Theatre of Charlotte and Kilgore College both produced Equus without any attempts to suppress the respective productions. Equus contains several minutes of male and female nudity, but the productions went on without any problems. When staging a potentially controversial play, the presenting organization must not be distracted by a false sense of security, and it must evaluate all possible catalysts for controversy. On Charlotte’s controversy, Tony Kushner commented, “The nudity is not an issue.... The issue is homophobia.”

Groups may oppose one aspect of a play (homosexuality), but use another (nudity) as a means of attack. Keep it in mind that less explicit sexual issues that may upset certain people or groups, such as changing the genders of certain characters or using an all-male or all-female cast.

2. Having an action plan to respond to controversy may affect the reaction of certain groups but cannot be guaranteed to prevent an attempt to suppress. Charlotte Repertory Theatre acknowledged that they didn’t do everything they could have done to reduce the risk of controversy, but there’s no way to know whether additional measures would have changed the outcomes of their controversy. Nevertheless, their tactics did protect funding and preserved the trust of their audiences. Whether greater communication with county and civic leaders would have resulted in fewer or no protests cannot be known. When planning any season, a theater must consider its threshold for risk and when it can best handle a controversy. When making decisions regarding programming,

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casting, even images used in advertising, a theater must know in advance what and how much it is willing to risk of its reputation and resources.

3. **Full disclosure to the public about the nature of a controversial play not only informs potential audiences but also alerts potential protesters.** When mounting a controversial play, a theater should make every effort to inform subscribers, potential audiences, and funders of the play’s contents and value. The staff of Charlotte Rep took great pains to do so, and Raymond Caldwell at Kilgore College worked with students to raise awareness of the play’s content. However, no matter how much outreach an organization provides to the community, there still may be an individual or group who is seeking an opportunity to draw attention to themselves through controversy. Charlotte Rep and Kilgore College, in spite of their efforts, met with opposition.

4. When a work of art is targeted for suppression, not only does the presenting institution suffer, but those affiliated with the organization may suffer as well. Therefore, because even those with the loosest affiliation can feel the affects of punitive measures, it is important for arts presenters to unite and advocate for each other. When one organization upsets a group, such as a city council or county commission, those groups have the power to not only reprimand the organization in question, but to keep others from committing the same offense. In Charlotte, arts organizations were penalized by an association as simple as geography. By existing in the same city as Charlotte Repertory Theatre, they were affected when the county cut $2.5 million from the local Arts and Science Council’s budget. In Kilgore, Texas, the Texas Shakespeare Festival was denied a previously promised grant from the county because the festival’s
director had been directly associated with Kilgore College’s production of *Angels*. Also, joint advocacy, especially ongoing efforts prior to the emergence of a challenge, in partnership with one or more other organizations, will strengthen the overall influence of an arts community. The organizations penalized in Charlotte banded together to reverse the funding cuts to the Arts & Science Council.

5. **Organizations must make arts advocacy as important as marketing or fundraising.** None of the organizations in this thesis made arts advocacy a routine activity. By forming and strengthening relationships with funders and policy makers, they might have experienced different outcomes for their respective controversies, or perhaps avoided them altogether. Arts advocacy demonstrates to government officials a commitment by the organization to its mission and illustrates how that mission serves the community. Advocacy can bring attention to how an organization affects the local economy or provides educational enrichment to children and adults. Most importantly, advocacy is an opportunity to make fellow advocates out of civic and government leaders. These people can influence the course which a controversy takes when and if it occurs.

6. If an arts presenter exists under the jurisdiction of a higher institution, such as a drama department within a university, **consider how programming decisions reflect on the governing institution.** At Catholic University of America, the school was responsible for representing the position of the Catholic Church because the school is sanctioned by the Vatican and is affiliated with several levels of institutional policy far broader than the specialized concerns of the
drama department. Everything a theater does reflects not only on the theater itself but upon any institution or institutions that stand behind it.

7. **The energies required of staff and board during a controversy may also be necessary well after the controversy has ended.** Even though their *Angels* controversies are over, Dr. William Holda and Keith Martin are still giving their time and attention to those who continue to be interested in their experiences. Martin averages “four to six requests a month for speaking engagements, thesis research, scholarly papers, case studies, media stories, you name it,” which has left him feeling “sick and tired of talking about *Angels.*”

Perhaps the sentiment is shared by Raymond Caldwell and Gitta Honegger, both of whom refused my requests for an interview.

8. **Do not hesitate to ask for help.** There are organizations that can help guide a theater through a crisis. Charlotte Rep sought legal advice from the American Civil Liberties Union and Volunteer Lawyers for the Arts. Others include Americans for the Arts, National Campaign for Freedom of Expression, People for the American Way, National Coalition Against Censorship, and Theatre Communications Group. Theaters may also want to read Richard Hansen’s article in *Theater Journal Online*, “Defensive Guidelines for Potentially Offensive Plays.” Though written specifically for college and university theater departments, Hansen’s points are also applicable to professional companies.

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4 Keith Martin, Charlotte, to the author, Washington DC, 3 July 2000, by electronic mail.

5 Contact information for these organizations appears in Appendix C.

Controversy presents both crisis and opportunity to an art organization. Arts presenters need to consider the risks and benefits of controversy before controversy happens. If they choose to present potentially controversial art, they must be able to articulate why they are assuming the inherent risks, what they hope to gain, and have in place the financial and human resources to deal with the controversy as it unfolds, as well as its aftermath. Controversy, while difficult for an organization, can be beneficial. For those less sure about their willingness to take the bad with the good, this thesis is a starting point to consider how an organization might proceed when presenting a work of art that some may find offensive.
APPENDIX A

MISSION OF THE CATHOLIC UNIVERSITY OF AMERICA

The Catholic University of America is a community of scholars, both faculty and students, set apart to discover, preserve, and impart the truth in all its forms, with particular reference to the needs and opportunities of the nation. As a university, it is essentially a free and autonomous center of study and an agency serving the needs of human society. It welcomes the collaboration of all scholars of good will who, through the process of study and reflection, contribute to these aims in an atmosphere of academic competence where freedom is fostered and where the only constraint upon truth is truth itself.

As a Catholic university, it desires to cultivate and impart an understanding of the Christian faith within the context of all forms of human inquiry and values. It seeks to assure, in an institutional manner, the proper intellectual and academic witness to Christian inspiration in individuals and in the community, and to provide a place for continuing reflection, in the light of Christian faith, upon the growing treasure of human knowledge.

As a member of the American academic community, it accepts the standards and procedures of American institutions and seeks to achieve distinction within the academic world.

Faithful to the Christian message as it comes through the Church and faithful to its own national traditions, The Catholic University of America has unique responsibilities to be of service to Christian thought and education in the Catholic community as well as to serve the nation and the world.
APPENDIX B

OPEN LETTER FROM WILLIAM M. HOLDA

November 2, 1999
Dear Friend:
As most of you have probably heard by now, on October 28th, the Gregg County Commissioners voted to rescind their budgetary allotment of $50,000 to the Texas Shakespeare Festival. They said that the reason was that the county should not be funding the fine arts, but there is no doubt that the rescinding of this money was directly connected to the College's decision to proceed with the play Angels in America. A number of you have asked how you can support the College, the Festival, and the principles of academic/artistic freedom. There are several ways: (1) within your own circle of influence, please let the action of the Commissioner's Court be known; (2) if you have ways of publicizing the loss of $50,000 by networking on the INTERNET, you will help spread the awareness of the consequences of preserving academic and artistic freedom and possibly help us recover some of the lost funds; (3) if you know of any possible funding sources, please do not hesitate referring us to those sources, or referring those sources to us. Thanks so much for your ongoing support; it has buoyed us through these difficult days.
William M. Holda
President, Kilgore College

APPENDIX C

RESOURCES

American Civil Liberties Union
125 Broad Street, 17th Floor
New York, NY 10004
(212) 344-3005
http://www.aclu.org

Americans for the Arts
1000 Vermont Avenue NW, 12th
Floor
Washington, DC 20005
(202) 371-2830
http://www.artsusa.org

National Campaign for Freedom of Expression
1429 G Street NW PMB #416
Washington, DC 20005-2009
(202) 393-2787
http://www.ncfe.net

National Coalition Against Censorship
275 Seventh Avenue
New York, New York 10001
(212) 807-6222
http://www.ncac.org

People for the American Way
2000 M Street, NW, Suite 400
Washington, DC 20036
(202) 467-4999 or (800) 326-7329
http://www.pfaw.org

Theatre Communications Group
355 Lexington Avenue
New York, NY 10017
(212) 697-5230
http://www.tcg.org

Volunteer Lawyers for the Arts
1 East 53rd Street
New York, NY 10022
(212) 319-2787
http://www.artswire.org/artlaw/info.html
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Kushner, Tony. Interview by Michael Kahn, 24 April 2000, Corcoran Gallery of Art “Playwrights on Stage” Series.

