

I want to give the audience a hint of a scene. No more than that. Give them too much and they won't contribute anything themselves. Give them just a suggestion and you get them working with you. That's what gives the theater meaning: when it becomes a social act.

– Orson Welles

OBJECTIVE:

Students will research an array of great American dramatic works, develop an analysis of one specific play that will be formally presented to the American Studies class, and develop a production of selected scenes that will be staged for an invited audience.

PROJECT PARTS:

1. Presentation (75 pts)

- 1.1. Synopsis of play
- 1.2. Playwright bio
- 1.3. Production history
- 1.4. Historical context of the script and production
- 1.5. Production Board: Set design, costume sketches,

2. Program (25 pts.)

- 2.1. Title of play
- 2.2. author
- 2.3. cast of characters
- 2.4. setting
- 2.5. playwright/script notes (adapted from presentation)

3. Performance (50 pts.)

- 3.1. scenes blocked
- 3.2. lines memorized
- 3.3. acting attempted

PROCEDURE:

1. Read excerpt "Theatre of the United States," from The Wadsworth Anthology of Drama, 5th edition, by W.B. Worthen to familiarize yourself with the history of theatre in the cultural history of the United States.
2. Read all synopses of selected American plays in preparation for discussion and casting. Each student will have the opportunity to choose three plays that are of particular interest to him/her, and Mr. Donnelly and Mr. Helfrich will select and cast scenes based upon those preferences.
3. Once scenes are assigned and roles are cast, groups will set about dividing up portions of research and crafting a rehearsal schedule. Each student will be required to investigate and familiarize themselves with the assigned script (yes, the whole thing), and it is imperative that the bulk of research be done and shared with your group before rehearsals get into full swing. Having a thorough understanding of the script and its context will serve to make rehearsals infinitely more productive and efficient.
4. Each group will prepare a presentation of research, the lengths of these presentations to be determined by the number of students in the group. The presentation grade is based not only on depth and accuracy of research, but also on quality of delivery.
5. Each group will prepare a program insert that will be part of the complete program for our production.
6. Each group will rehearse and prepare their assigned scene, with directorial advice from Mr. D and Mr. H, for performance on an evening TBD. Attendance at the performance is mandatory.

LIST OF SELECTED PLAYS

Trifles, by Susan Glaspell

The sheriff and the county attorney investigate the house of John Wright shortly after his murder. The men are convinced that Mrs. Wright has committed the murder, yet have found no evidence.

As the two question Mr. Hale, the man who discovers the dead body, they poke fun at the women and their "trifles." When the men head upstairs to look for evidence, their wives examine the kitchen where they find clues pointing to Mrs. Wright's guilt. In other areas of the house, the women discover more clues, clues that the men overlook as mere "trifles."

The condescending attitude of the investigators toward their wives make them feel like "trifles" and causes them to withhold the evidence.

The Little Foxes, by Lillian Hellman

The focus is on Southerner Regina Hubbard Giddens, who struggles for wealth and freedom within the confines of an early 20th century society where a father considered only sons as legal heirs. As a result, her avaricious brothers Benjamin and Oscar are independently wealthy, while she must rely upon her sickly, wheelchair-using husband Horace for financial support.

Regina's brother Oscar has married Birdie, his much-maligned, alcoholic wife, solely to acquire her family's plantation and its cotton fields. Oscar now wants to join forces with his brother, Benjamin, to construct a cotton mill. They approach their sister with their need for an additional \$75,000 to invest in the project. Oscar initially proposes marriage between his son Leo and Regina's daughter Alexandra – first cousins – as a means of getting Horace's money, but Horace and Alexandra are repulsed by the suggestion. When Regina asks Horace outright for the money, he refuses, so Leo, a bank teller, is pressured into stealing his uncle Horace's railroad bonds from the bank's safety deposit box.

Horace, after discovering this, tells Regina he is going to change his will in favor of their daughter, and also will claim he gave Leo the bonds as a loan, thereby cutting Regina out of the deal completely. When he suffers a heart attack during this chat, she makes no effort to help him. He dies within hours, without anyone knowing his plan and before changing his will.

This leaves Regina free to blackmail her brothers by threatening to report Leo's theft unless they give her 75% ownership in the cotton mill (it is in Regina's mind, a fair exchange for the stolen bonds). The price Regina ultimately pays for her evil deeds is the loss of her daughter Alexandra's love and respect. Regina's actions cause Alexandra to finally understand the importance of not idly watching people do evil. She tells Regina she will not watch her be "one who eats the earth," and abandons her. Having let her husband die, alienated her brothers, and driven away her only child, Regina is left wealthy but completely alone.

A Streetcar Named Desire, by Tennessee Williams

Blanche DuBois is a fading, but still-attractive, Southern belle whose pretensions to virtue and culture only thinly mask alcoholism and delusions of grandeur. Her poise is an illusion she presents to shield others (but most of all, herself) from her reality, and an attempt to make herself still attractive to new male suitors. Blanche arrives at the apartment of her sister Stella Kowalski in the Faubourg Marigny neighborhood of New Orleans, on Elysian Fields Avenue; the local transportation that she takes to arrive there includes a streetcar route named "Desire." The steamy, urban ambiance is a shock to Blanche's nerves. Stella, who fears the reaction of her husband Stanley, welcomes Blanche with some trepidation. As Blanche explains that their ancestral Southern plantation, Belle Reve in Laurel, Mississippi, has been "lost" due to the "epic fornications" of their ancestors, her veneer of self-possession begins to slip drastically. Blanche tells Stella that her supervisor allowed her to take time off from her job as an English teacher because of her upset nerves, when in fact, she has been fired for having an affair with a 17-year-old student. This turns out not to be the only seduction in which she has engaged, and, along with other problems, has led her to escape Laurel. A brief marriage marred by the discovery that her husband, Allan Grey, was having a homosexual affair and his subsequent suicide has led Blanche to withdraw into a world in which fantasies and illusions blend seamlessly with reality.

In contrast to both the self-effacing and deferential Stella and the pretentious refinement of Blanche, Stella's husband, Stanley Kowalski, is a force of nature: primal, rough-hewn, brutish, and sensual. He dominates Stella in every way and is physically and emotionally abusive. Stella tolerates his primal behavior as this is part of what attracted her in the first place; their love and relationship are heavily based on powerful—even animal-like—sexual chemistry, something that Blanche finds impossible to understand.

The arrival of Blanche upsets her sister and brother-in-law's system of mutual dependence. Stella's concern for her sister's well-being emboldens Blanche to hold court in the Kowalski apartment, infuriating Stanley and leading to conflict in his relationship with his wife. Blanche and Stanley are on a collision course, and Stanley's friend and Blanche's would-be suitor, Harold "Mitch" Mitchell, gets trampled in their path. Stanley discovers Blanche's past through a co-worker who travels to Laurel frequently, and he confronts her with the things that she has been trying to put behind her, partly out of concern that her character flaws may be damaging to the lives of those in her new home, just as they were in Laurel, and partly out of a distaste for her pretense in general. However, his attempts to "unmask" her are predictably cruel and violent. In their final confrontation, it is implied that Stanley rapes Blanche, resulting in her nervous breakdown. Stanley has her committed to a mental institution, and in the closing moments, Blanche utters her signature line to the kindly doctor who leads her away: "Whoever you are, I have always depended on the kindness of strangers."

The reference to the streetcar named Desire—providing the aura of New Orleans geography—is symbolic. Blanche not only has to travel on a

streetcar route named "Desire" to reach Stella's home on "Elysian Fields" but her desire acts as an irrepressible force throughout the play—she can only hang on as her desires lead her.

The character of Blanche is thought to be based on Williams' sister Rose Williams who struggled with her mental health and became incapacitated after a lobotomy.

Death of a Salesman, by Arthur Miller

Willy Loman returns home exhausted after a cancelled business trip. Worried over Willy's state of mind and recent car "crash," his wife Linda suggests that he ask his boss Howard Wagner to allow him to work in his home city so he will not have to travel. Willy complains to Linda that their son, Biff, has yet to make good on his life. Despite Biff's promise as an athlete in high school, he flunked senior year math and never went to college.

Biff and his brother, Happy, who is also visiting, reminisce about their childhood together. They discuss their father's mental degeneration, which they have witnessed by his constant vacillations and talking to himself. When Willy walks in, angry that the two boys have never amounted to anything, Biff and Happy tell Willy that Biff plans to make a business proposition the next day in an effort to pacify their father.

The next day, Willy goes to ask his boss for a job in town while Biff goes to make a business proposition, but neither is successful. Willy gets angry and ends up getting fired when the boss tells him he needs a rest and can no longer represent the company. Biff waits hours to see a former employer who does not remember him and turns him down. Biff impulsively steals a fountain pen. Willy then goes to the office of his neighbor Charley, where he runs into Charley's son Bernard (now a successful lawyer); Bernard tells him that Biff originally wanted to do well in summer school, but something happened in Boston when Biff went to visit Willy that changed his mind.

Happy, Biff, and Willy meet for dinner at a restaurant, but Willy refuses to hear bad news from Biff. Happy tries to get Biff to lie to their father. Biff tries to tell him what happened as Willy gets angry and slips into a flashback of what happened in Boston the day Biff came to see him. Willy had been in a hotel on a sales trip with a young woman when Biff arrived. From that moment, Biff's view of his father changed and set Biff adrift.

Biff leaves the restaurant in frustration, followed by Happy and two girls that Happy has picked up. They leave a confused and upset Willy behind in the restaurant. When they later return home, their mother angrily confronts them for abandoning their father while Willy remains talking to himself outside. Biff goes outside to try to reconcile with Willy. The discussion quickly escalates into another argument, at which point Biff forcefully tries to convey to his father that he is not meant for anything great, that he is simply ordinary, insisting that they both are. The feud culminates with Biff hugging Willy and crying as he tries to get him to let go of the unrealistic dreams he still carries for Biff and wants instead for Willy to accept him for who he really is. He tells his father he loves him.

Rather than listen to what Biff actually says, Willy realizes his son has forgiven him and thinks Biff will now pursue a career as a businessman. Willy kills himself, intentionally crashing his car so that Biff can use the life insurance money to start his business. However, at the funeral Biff retains his belief that he does not want to become a businessman. Happy, on the other hand, chooses to follow in his father's footsteps.

Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? or The Zoo Story, by Edward Albee

The play *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* is set on the campus of a small, New England university. It opens with the main characters, George and Martha coming home from a party at her father's house. The two of them clearly care deeply for each other, but events have turned their marriage into a nasty battle between two disenchanted, cynical enemies. Even though the pair arrives home at two o'clock in the morning, they are expecting guests: the new math professor and his wife.

Of course, as it turns out, this new, young professor, Nick, actually works in the biology department. He and his wife, Honey, walk into a brutal social situation. In the first act, "Fun and Games," Martha and George try to fight and humiliate each other in new, inventive ways. As they peel away each other's pretenses and self-respect, George and Martha use Honey and Nick as pawns, transforming their guests into an audience to witness humiliation, into levers for creating jealousy, and into a means for expressing their own sides of their mutual story. In the second act, "Walpurgisnacht," these games get even nastier. The evening turns into a nightmare. George and Martha even attack Honey and Nick, attempting to force them to reveal their dirty secrets and true selves. Finally, in the last act, "The Exorcism," everyone's secrets have been revealed and purged. Honey and Nick go home, leaving Martha and George to try to rebuild their shattered marriage.

The Zoo Story: This one-act play concerns two characters, Peter and Jerry. Peter is a middle-class publishing executive with a wife, two daughters, two cats and two parakeets. Jerry is an isolated and disheartened man. These men meet on a park bench in New York City's Central Park. Jerry is desperate to have a meaningful conversation with another human being. He intrudes on Peter's peaceful state by interrogating him and forcing him to listen to stories like "THE STORY OF JERRY AND THE DOG", and the reason behind his visit to the zoo. The action is linear, unfolding in front of the audience in "real time". The elements of ironic humor and unrelenting dramatic suspense are brought to a climax when Jerry brings his victim down to his own savage level.

The catalyst for the shocking ending transpires when Peter announces, "I really must be going home;..." At the same time Jerry begins pushing Peter off the bench. Peter decides to fight for his territory on the bench and becomes angry. Unexpectedly, Jerry pulls a knife on Peter, and then drops it as initiative for Peter to grab. When Peter holds the knife defensively, Jerry charges him and impales himself on the knife. Bleeding on the park bench, Jerry finishes his zoo story by bringing it into the immediate present, "Could I have planned all this. No... no, I couldn't have. But I think I did." Horrified, Peter runs away from Jerry whose dying words, "Oh...my...God", are a combination of scornful mimicry and supplication.

Barefoot in the Park, by Neil Simon

Paul and Corie Bratter are newlyweds in every sense of the word. He's a straight-as-an-arrow lawyer and she's a free spirit always looking for the latest kick. Their new apartment is her most recent find-too expensive with bad plumbing and in need of a paint job. After a six day honeymoon, they get a surprise visit from Corie's loopy mother and decide to play matchmaker during a dinner with their neighbor-in-the-attic Velasco, where everything that can go wrong, does. Paul just doesn't understand Corie, as she sees it. He's too staid, too boring and she just wants him to be a little more spontaneous, running "barefoot in the park" would be a start...

Zoot Suit, by Luis Valdez

In Luis Valdez's play, Zoot Suit, Henry Reyna and his fellow 38th Street Gang members are going to a dance. At the dance, they encounter their rival gang, the Downey gang. A fight breaks out between the two gangs after Henry's brother, Rudy, causes a commotion. After the fight, Henry and his gang leave the dance.

Henry and his girlfriend, Della, drive to Sleepy Lagoon, a reservoir where youngsters come to socialize. Near Sleepy Lagoon, Henry notices a commotion in the Williams' Ranch. Mistaking the noise as a party, Henry and Della go to the house. Little do they know that the Downey gang came to the house earlier and harassed the Williams'. Mistaking Henry and his friends as the Downey gang, the Williams' attack the group. Fleeing from the scene, Henry and his friends did not realize that Jose Williams, of the Williams' Ranch, passed away that night.

A few days later, Henry and his fellow gang members are arrested and charged for the murder of Jose Williams. Their lawyer, George Shearer, and editor, Alice, are fighting for the rights of the alleged murderers. Even though evidence states that it was the Downey gang who killed Jose Williams, the Jury was not in favor of the 38th Street Gang Members. After receiving unequal and unfair treatment from the court system, Henry and his friends are unjustly sentenced to prison.

Henry and his friends are sent to San Quentin Jail where they await for their case to be appealed. During his stay in jail, Henry forms a love interest with his editor, Alice. Henry is romantically involved with Della; and Alice does not want to exploit any indiscretions. Meanwhile, George, their Lawyer, is drafted to serve in the war. With the stresses of being arrested, falsely accused, in a confused love affair, and with the loss of interest with the case, Pachuco – Henry's inner voice – decides to withdraw himself from the situation. Henry spent the remainder of his sentence in solitary confinement.

During this event, the Zoot Suit Riots of Los Angeles and other cities occur. Racial tension during the War causes an outbreak of riots. Finally being released from jail, Henry and his friends return to their families. In the play, Henry's fate has multiple alternative paths. The first path, Henry dies as a criminal; he goes back to jail and dies from the stresses of his crimes. The second path, Henry dies as a hero; he becomes a war hero and dies from serving his country. The third alternative is presented in which he lives a fairly normal life; he gets married and has children. It is up to the audience to determine the fate of Henry Reyna.

Fefu and Her Friends, by María Irene Fornés

Fefu and her Friends is set in New England in the spring of 1935. The story takes the audience through an entire day beginning in the noon and ending in the evening; it climaxes in a murder scene.

The play is split into three parts. It begins in the living room of Fefu's country house. Part 2 is set in four different areas of the house: the lawn, the study, the bedroom, and the kitchen. Fornés deconstructs the familiar stage, removing the fourth wall, and scenes are played in multiple locations simultaneously throughout the theater. The audience is divided into groups to watch each scene, then they rotate to the next set, as the scene is repeated until each group has seen all four scenes.

Fefu and her seven female friends gather at Fefu's house to rehearse a presentation for their charity toward school education. Each character plays a role in this event. Before and after their rehearsal, the women interact with one another, and with male characters, and share their thoughts and feelings about life along with their personal struggles and societal concerns. Fornés portrays these characters as real women, in a shift in her play-writing style to realism and naturalism in settings, characters and situations.

Fefu and Her Friends is recognized as a feminist play for its all-female cast,[8] central ideas of gender roles, and its bold deviations from conventional stage presentation and audience involvement.[9] Fornés divides the stage into a kitchen, bedroom, study, and lawn, and a short scene in each area is acted out with a fourth of the audience closely viewing each part. The groups of spectators rotate until they have seen all four scenes. These individual scenes highlight conflict in all of the women's lives and thus illustrate a more communal feminist struggle than "the typical feminist approach of the early days of the second wave of the movement which emphasized the existence and the rights of the individual woman." Fornés uses the play as representation of the struggle of women against the female stereotype. Any interactions with male characters are done offstage and no established male characters are seen to portray how women behave when not in the presence of men.

Venus, by Susan Lori Parks

In 1810, The Venus Hottentot (as she is dubbed)-a young black woman with an enormous posterior-is lured away from her menial job in South Africa to tour the world and make lots of money. Once in England, however, she is sold to a freak show and becomes a star. She shows off her attribute, bringing in crowds and raking in money for the side show owners. Quickly becoming adept at displaying herself and understanding what the people want from her as a freak, she even tries to break out on her own, but can't quite master that in those social times. Eventually, she is procured by a white doctor who is more than fascinated with her. He falls in love with her and keeps her as his mistress until he is in danger of

losing his medical reputation and social standing. Venus, who journeyed to Europe with high hopes, at the end of her short life, was dissected by the man she loved.

The Laramie Project, by Moises Kaufman

Laramie, Wyoming, population 26,687. Laramie, often referred to as the “gem city of the plains” was the site of the brutal murder of Matthew Shepard, a 21 year-old, gay, University of Wyoming student. On October 6, 1998, he was found tied to a “buck” fence, beaten and unconscious. On October 8, 1998, Russell Henderson and Aaron McKinney were arrested for the kidnapping, aggravated robbery and attempted first-degree murder of Matthew Shepard. On October 12, 1998, Matthew Shepard died in Poudre Valley Health Center after 5 days in a coma. The charges against Henderson and McKinney were amended to include first-degree murder.

The Laramie Project is a play by Moises Kaufman and the members of the Tectonic Theatre Project. “On November 14, 1998, members of Tectonic Theatre Project traveled to Laramie, Wyoming, and conducted interviews with the people of the town.” The Play is “edited from those interviews, as well as from journal entries by members of the company.” (The Laramie Project, “Introduction”) The Play is about the town of Laramie, its citizens, and their reaction to Matthew Shepard’s murder.

As one of the investigating officers, Sargeant Hing stated: “How could this happen? I—I think a lot of people just don’t understand, and even I don’t really understand, how someone can do something like that. We have one of the most vocal populations of gay people in the state. . . .And it’s pretty much: Live and let live.”

Fat Pig, by Neil Labute

Fat Pig tells us the story of Tom, a stereotypical professional in a large city, who falls for a very plus-size librarian named Helen. They meet in a crowded cafeteria at lunchtime and get to talking. Tom is taken with her brash acceptance of the way people see her and her honesty. He asks her for her number and they start to date. A couple of weeks later, Carter, Tom’s best friend, starts to notice the signs of Tom having a new girlfriend. He obnoxiously pesters him for information about the new girl and in order to get it mentions it in front of a woman from accounting, Jeannie, who has been seeing Tom on-and-off for a while. She gets very upset which gets Tom to admit that he is “sort of” seeing her. Carter asks Tom what he is doing that night, and Tom says he is busy. Carter knows then that he is meeting Helen at a restaurant Tom frequents, Tom denies it and says it is a business dinner with people from the Chicago branch of their firm. Carter, not believing him, stops by the restaurant and sees them together. He approaches them and introduces himself to Helen, and she excuses herself to go to the restroom. While she is gone Carter thoroughly insults her weight and calling her a lot of horrible things, not knowing that this is Tom’s new girlfriend. He assumes then that Tom was telling the truth about the people coming in from Chicago, since he thought that Tom would never date anyone that “fat”.

Later that week Jeannie pays a visit to Tom in his office. She has found out that no people from Chicago came to visit. She demands to know what is going on with him and her and he says that he is not interested and will never be again. Earlier, she and Carter had been gossiping about the “fat cow from Chicago,” which is how Jeannie found out about the whole thing. So once Tom says that it wasn’t a business dinner, she flips out and smacks him, hurt that he would pick someone like Helen over her. Carter looks on and sort of apologizes for being rude about Helen, saying that he didn’t know she was his girlfriend. He asks to see a picture and after a lot of pestering gets one from Tom. He then proceeds to run down the hall and show everyone. Throughout the rest of the play, Carter tries to convince Tom that he should “stick to his own kind.”

Meanwhile Tom and Helen are falling more and more in love. Helen is offered a better job in another town but she doesn’t want to leave Tom. She asks if she can meet his friends, when he is hesitant, she knows that he is ashamed of her. But not wanting to give her that impression he tells her that she will meet his friends when they have a work barbecue on the beach. The day arrives for the outing, but once they get there they are secluded from everyone. Helen brings up her concerns and gives him an ultimatum, either accept all of her and that includes defending her to his friends, or this cannot work. He replies that he cannot handle it and that she should take the job in the other town and both are left broken hearted.

Angels in America, by Tony Kushner

Angels in America focuses on the stories of two troubled couples, one gay, one straight: “word processor” Louis Ironson and his lover Prior Walter, and Mormon lawyer Joe Pitt and his wife Harper. After the funeral of Louis’s grandmother, Prior tells him that he has contracted AIDS, and Louis panics. He tries to care for Prior but soon realizes he cannot stand the strain and fear. Meanwhile, Joe is offered a job in the Justice Department by Roy Cohn, his right-wing, bigoted mentor and friend. But Harper, who is addicted to Valium and suffers anxiety and hallucinations, does not want to move to Washington.

The two couples’ fates quickly become intertwined: Joe stumbles upon Louis crying in the bathroom of the courthouse where he works, and they strike up an unlikely friendship based in part on Louis’s suspicion that Joe is gay. Harper and Prior also meet, in a fantastical mutual dream sequence in which Prior, operating on the “threshold of revelation,” reveals to Harper that her husband is a closeted homosexual. Harper confronts Joe, who denies it but says he has struggled inwardly with the issue. Roy receives a different kind of surprise: At an appointment with his doctor Henry, he learns that he too has been diagnosed with AIDS. But Roy, who considers gay men weak and ineffectual, thunders that he has nothing in common with them—AIDS is a disease of homosexuals, whereas he has “liver cancer.” Henry, disgusted, urges him to use his clout to obtain an experimental AIDS drug.

Prior’s illness and Harper’s terrors both grow worse. Louis strays from Prior’s bedside to seek anonymous sex in Central Park at night. Fortunately, Prior has a more reliable caretaker in Belize, an ex-drag queen and dear friend. Prior confesses to Belize that he has been hearing a wonderful and mysterious voice; Belize is skeptical, but once he leaves we hear the voice speak to Prior, telling him she is a messenger who will soon arrive for him.

As the days pass, Louis and Joe grow closer and the sexual tinge in their banter grows more and more obvious. Finally, Joe drunkenly telephones his mother Hannah in Salt Lake City to tell her that he is a homosexual, but Hannah tells him he is being ridiculous. Nonetheless, she makes plans to sell her house and come to New York to put things right. In a tense and climactic scene, Joe tells Harper about his feelings, and she screams at him to leave, while simultaneously Louis tells Prior he is moving out.

The disconsolate Prior is awakened one night by the ghosts of two ancestors who tell him they have come to prepare the way for the unseen messenger. Tormented by such supernatural appearances and by his anguish over Louis, Prior becomes increasingly desperate. Joe, equally distraught in his own way, tells Roy he cannot accept his offer; Roy explodes at him and calls him a "sissy." He then tells Joe about his greatest achievement, illegally intervening in the espionage trial of Ethel Rosenberg in the 1950s and guaranteeing her execution. Joe is shocked by Roy's lack of ethics. When Joe leaves, the ghost of Ethel herself appears, having come to witness Roy's last days on earth. In the climax of Part One, Joe follows Louis to the park, then accompanies him home for sex, while Prior's prophetic visions culminate in the appearance of an imposing and beautiful Angel who crashes through the roof of his apartment and proclaims, "The Great Work begins."

In Part Two, Harper indulges in the fantasy that she is in Antarctica with her imaginary companion Mr. Lies. But Antarctica turns out to be Brooklyn's Prospect Park, and she is picked up by the police. With Joe nowhere to be found, Hannah comes to her rescue, tending to her in the depths of depression. She finally insists that Harper join her at the Mormon Visitor's Center, where she has begun to volunteer. Meanwhile, the increasingly sick Roy checks in to the hospital where Belize works as a nurse. Roy insults him with cutting, racist remarks, but Belize, angry but filled with involuntary respect, gives him valuable advice on his treatment. Their relationship is always bitter but heated and icy by turns. Belize, however, demonstrates his considerable compassion for Prior, who tells him the full story of the Angel's visit. After her dramatic arrival, she gives Prior a prophetic book and explains that she seeks his help to halt the migratory tendency of human beings, which the Angels in Heaven believe tempted God to abandon them. God, she explains, left Heaven forever on the day of the San Francisco earthquake in 1906, and since then his Angels—whose vast powers are fueled by constant sexual activity—have been rudderless and alone. To reverse the trend, the Angel says humans must end their constant motion, their addiction to change. Not surprisingly, Prior is aghast at her words and vows to flee from her at all costs.

Roy learns that his political opponents plan to disbar him for an ethical lapse, but he vows to remain a lawyer until he dies. In a friendly rapprochement, he gives Joe his blessing, until Joe reveals that he has left Harper for a man—he has been living for a blissful month with Louis. Stunned and angry, he demands that Joe end his gay relationship at once. Ethel comes to observe him in his misery. Joe's wife, on the other hand, spends her days at the Mormon Visitor's Center watching a diorama of the Mormon migration featuring a father dummy who looks suspiciously like Joe. When Prior drops in to conduct research on angels, a fantasy sequence ensues in which Louis and Joe appear in the diorama. The formerly silent Mormon mother comes to life and leaves with Harper, giving her painful but valuable advice on loss and change.

Louis and Joe's idyll draws to an end when Louis says he wants to see Prior again. At their meeting, Prior coldly insists that he must present visible proof of his internal bruises. Belize later tells Louis about Joe's relationship with Roy, whose politics and personal history Louis despises. When Louis angrily confronts Joe, their fight turns physical and Joe punches him. He apologizes, horrified, but they never speak again. Roy nears his end as well, reeling from Joe's disclosure and from Ethel's news that he has been disbarred. He dies, but not before tricking Ethel into tenderly singing for him. After his death, Belize summons Louis to recite the Kaddish, the Jewish prayer for the dead, to demonstrate thanks (for his stash of AIDS drugs) and forgiveness. Ethel leads Louis in the prayer, the play's emotional and moral climax.

After Prior suffers an episode at the visitor's center, Hannah takes him to the hospital. There, the Angel descends, and Prior wrestles her. He succeeds, and is granted entry into Heaven to refuse his prophecy. In Heaven, which resembles San Francisco after the great earthquake, Prior tells the Angels that despite all his suffering he wants them to bless him and give him more life. The Angels sympathize but say they cannot halt the plague. He tells them should God return, they should sue Him for abandonment. Back on earth, his fever broken, Prior tells Louis he loves him but that he cannot ever come back. Harper leaves Joe for the last time and sets off on an optimistic voyage to San Francisco to begin her own life.

In 1990, four years later, Louis, Prior, Belize and Hannah appear in a moving epilogue. Prior says that the disease has killed many but that he intends to live on, and that the "Great Work" will continue.