

## Searching for Sanctuary

by Amy Krivohlavek

*Angels Fall* reviewed April 21, 2006

When a play opens on Broadway, it is judged by critics and audiences within its specific cultural moment; reviews can either buttress or deflate a production, but the work's lasting impact is more difficult to predict or measure. As years pass, a playwright's words can become more or less profound, and a play's longevity is often dependent on its reception by regional audiences, as well as the creative ingenuity of the theater companies that choose to rescue it from obscurity.



Jeff Farber as Niles Harris  
Photo Credit:Andrew Seltz

When esteemed playwright Lanford Wilson's play *Angels Fall* opened on Broadway in 1982, *New York Times* critic Frank Rich was quick to point out its "ailments." Although Wilson had won the Pulitzer in 1980 for *Talley's Folly*, his latest effort played a scant 57 performances.

Some 25 years later, Theater Forum has revived *Angels Fall* in a compelling, intimate production, staging Wilson's play—a study of six individuals stranded in a mission church in New Mexico—where it might have worked best all along: in a church's sanctuary.



Kathryn Barnhardt as Vita Harris  
Photo Credit:Andrew Seltz

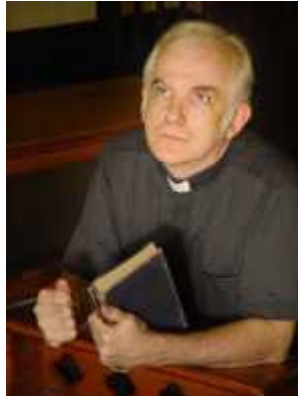
Set designer Andrew Seltz has cordoned off a section of the cavernous Church of All Nations to create this intimate sanctuary, where the audience surrounds the playing space on three sides. The tiny mission contains six pews, and the actors, directed with sensitivity by the capable Russell Taylor, move fluidly within the snug space.

The six arrive at the church for various reasons, but they are all detained when the roads are closed due to complications loosely ascribed to a mine explosion with potential nuclear fallout. Wilson has been called an American Chekhov, and *Angels Falls* is definitely an in-depth

Chekhovian character study. In a relatively static environment, there is little overtly physical action but plenty of emotional conflict as the characters interact with one another to locate the sources of sanctuary in their lives beyond the mission. Wilson's script constructs a poetic, almost timeless dramatic landscape.

He populates this landscape with flawed, lovably human characters stricken with a variety of crises, and the well-cast performers turn in fine performances all around. Niles Harris (Jeff Farber), a middle-aged art history professor, has recently abandoned teaching after losing faith in the merits of academic knowledge. He is accompanied by his wife, Vita (Kathryn Barnhardt), his one-time student and now caretaker, who is traveling with him on a trip to Phoenix for mental treatment and rejuvenation. In two exceptional performances, Farber handles Niles's fits of histrionics with humor and ease, while Barnhardt gives a refreshingly layered performance as a young wife determined to stay cheerful even in the face of her husband's explosions.

The warm and compassionate Marion Clay (June Flanagan), although still visibly upset by the recent death of her artist husband, stops in with her young lover, Zappy Zappala (Frankie Ferrara), a haughty professional tennis player, on their way to his next big tournament. Ferrara offers a well-nuanced take on the high-strung, hypochondriac Zappy, while Flanagan brings a warmly compassionate—although sometimes uncomfortably maternal—quality to Marion. Her relationship with Zappy does not immediately come across as a romantic one.



Tim Moore as Father Bill Doherty  
Photo Credit: Andrew Seltz

The bright young Navajo doctor Don Tabaha (Andrew Reaves) is torn between staying in New Mexico to minister to the Indian tribes who need his services or taking a high-profile research job, the work to which he feels more suited. The mission's energetic priest, Father Doherty (Tim Moore), makes no secret of his opinion on the matter, goading Don with guilt and even hiding his keys to defer his departure. Reaves is appropriately intense as the conflicted Don, and Moore's Father Doherty is impishly jovial as he mischievously hurls rocks at the low-flying helicopters.

When the helicopters finally announce that the roads are clear, Father Doherty shouts back, "You've given us all our monthly dose of fear, now fly back to White Sands and goad. Shame. Shame! Don't they love to scare us to death. Don't we love them to do it. Can't you feel the tingling? Isn't fear exciting?"

In our post-9/11 age, the idea of sanctuary perhaps has more immediacy than it did in the early 1980s. And although the characters leave the mission irrefutably changed, to conclude that their problems

have been solved would detract from Wilson's eloquent script. Instead, they—and we—have had a moment of communion, in a setting complete with altar and votive candles. This intersection of lives is certainly a theatrical convention, but it's also one of the minor miracles of devastating circumstances. And in this sense, Theater Forum gives us a thoughtful reinvention of *Angels Fall*, a play whose meaning has become even more potent in our particular cultural moment.