3 Community, History and Transformation

Introduction

Tony Kushner, award-winning playwright and political activist, tells us in the documentary Wrestling with Angels (Freida Lee Mock, 2006, US): ‘As far as I am concerned it’s an ethical obligation to look for hope, it’s an ethical obligation not to despair. If you look there is always a possibility of finding where action can change the course of things.’ Evoking the spirit of his groundbreaking play Angels in America (HBO, 2003, US) (discussed below), Kushner affirms his positive stance in suggesting the agency that ordinary people may possess to influence their social environments (see Figure 3.1). In Angels Kushner worked towards changing the course of life through exploring the significance of AIDS in relation to the connectedness of minority identities, negated within President Ronald Reagan’s America. Such a focus on community ideals and historical settings renders Angels in America a central site of investigation, which evokes not only the agency of producers such as Kushner, but also stimulates audiences’ engagement to political arenas. Whilst this book explores fictional and factual forms, a consistent point within this is the social agency of the producer, the performer and the audience. This foregrounds transgressive scenarios where dominant and oppressive identity is challenged. As Kushner affirms, these are opportunities for action and change, grounding the self in the political.

Consequently this chapter explores the political agency of those involved in production, examining issues concerning the definition of community and contexts of history. At the same time I foreground the possibility of transformation, and issues of postmodernity in narrative construction. This I argue occurs where self-reflexive storytellers progress narrative ideas, and extend boundary potentials. I explore the issue of
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Figure 3.1 Tony Kushner, in a moment of introspection. Image courtesy of Tony Kushner

storytelling, relating the context of the audience and community as central in discursive reproduction. I argue that new storytellers not only produce self-reflexive narratives of personal desire, but also that they engage with selected textual forms and attempt to reinvent them. This is particularly relevant for gay men and lesbians in connection to normative community and dominant history: often they are situated at the periphery. However, through the potential of new storytelling, gay men and lesbians as producers, performers and audiences exhibit agency in the progression of community and historical ideals.

To explore these ideas this chapter presents various case studies which cross the producer/performer and audience/community divide, making connections within self-agency and reflexive storytelling. Subsequently within various performative and identification contexts, this chapter explores the discursive potential of community and historical ideals, relating the social agency of gay men and lesbians involved in media production and performance as new storytellers.

The film *Victim* (Basil Dearden, 1961, UK) is discussed, with relation to the agency of actor Dirk Bogarde (1921–99), who whilst he did not affirm that he was gay, personally identified with homosexual narratives, and attempted to reform ideas (furthermore his family willingly present him as a valued icon in the canon of gay men – discussed below). The