[Snap Judgment]

[somber music]

**Glynn:** Okay, during higher education, I'm in East Lansing, Michigan, for some job. And I've recently discovered that I like good food. Elegantly prepared on a plate. [chuckles] Only, I can afford good food, so I'm eating crap. Wings, pizza, bowls of ramen slipped down over the sink. It's horrible. And my neighbor, Terry, lives two apartments down, stocky, big guy. He and I, we get to talking and it turns out, we're in the same boat. "We can't keep doing this," he says. “It's ridiculous. We've got to cook.”

[upbeat music]

“[scoffs] Ah, man. It's crazy cooking for one person. It costs more than eating this junk.” And Terry is like, “No, no. We cook for each other, four nights a week. You cook two. I cook two.” “I don't cook.” “Neither do I. We've got to learn. But here's the rule, six bucks a meal, tops. Whatever we make, we eat. No matter what, we eat it. Deal?” “Deal.” And I'm not saying I'm Gordon Ramsay or nothing, but knowing the other guy is going to eat what you make, it focuses the mind. We brought down actual silverware at the table, napkins. If we're underbudget on ingredients, we might even enjoy a cheap bottle of wine. And I'm getting better and better at this cooking. And one day, I'm cooking up a wok-seared chicken and cashew stir fry with a sugar glaze reduction. And I get a call from fine Shelly Dunaway, “How you doing? And what's up this weekend with you and your girls?” “And what do you mean I didn't wave back at you?" And not until Terry knocks on the door, [knock on the door] do I notice a smoke. I tried to save it, I do, but you can't save charcoal. Sauce doesn't help. “Hey, man, I'm sorry about that. Let me order pizza.” “No, no, no. We made a deal. A deal is a deal. We're going to eat it. Eat it.” “Brother, this is--” “Plate it up.” “Do you understand--” “Plate it up.” I scrape this wreckage onto two plates. We sit down. We look at each other from across the table, scoop the mess onto utensils, and shove the horrible into our mouths.

[upbeat music]

My name is Glynn Washington. Do or do not, there is no try, when you're listening to Snap Judgment.

[upbeat music]

Okay, you're driving on I-20 from Abilene, and across Texas, it's all prairies and open sky. But then about an hour past Dallas, you get trees, pine trees, a wall of them as far as I can see. You're now behind the pine curtain of East Texas. And sensitive listeners should be advised, we're going to meet some real people. In context, this story contains references to both drugs and sex, along with explicit language, including homophobic slurs. Keep on driving past the pines, past Tyler, past Liberty City. Eventually, you get the tiny town of Kilgore, known mostly for its oil derricks, and the small two-year junior college, with a small theater program run by Raymond Caldwell. The scene opens with Raymond in his bedroom on a summer night in 1999. Raymond is trying to decide which play he and his students will put on that fall. Dim the house lights. Snap Judgment.

**Raymond:** I was sitting in my bedroom reading this stack of plays, probably 12 of them, one right after the other. As I was reading them, I came across *Angels in America* which I had bought because I'd heard of it, of course. I don't mean to sound cliché, but it knocked me off my feet. I had never read anything like that. I've never encountered anything modern this well written. I had already determined that one thing I needed to do was a play that was written during the lifetime of my students because most theaters, college theaters, in particular, tend to rely on the classics.

*Angels in America* by Tony Kushner is an epic play about three hours long and only the first part of two plays, *Angels in America Part 1* is called *Millennium Approaches*. Part 2 is called *Perestroika*. I read *Angels in America Part 1: Millennium Approaches*. And, of course, that title alone seems so appropriate because it was 1999.

The vehicle through which he tells the story is a group of gay men living in New York City, all successful men who are dealing with the struggles, the sorrow, the pain, the agony of AIDS, and how they are going to cope with such a tragedy. [pause] But it was strong, there's a lot of strong language. There are a lot of scenes that imply homosexual behavior, some not imply, but actually portray. And in addition to that, it was strongly political, very anti-Reagan, all of which I agreed with. But I live in an area in Texas where it's strongly conservative, and the buckle of the Bible Belt. It's not your cultural hub. Let's put it that way. The majority of them would never set foot inside a theater to see a play. One guy said to me, “When I think of Shakespeare, I think of a guy wearing tights and holding a spear.” And I thought, “Oh, there's no way I could do this play. [chuckles] I'd be run out of town on a rail,” so I just dropped it beside my chair and picked up the next play.

**John:** Tell me about Joseph.

**Raymond:** Oh, my.

**Joey:** My name is Joseph McGee, and I am who I am.

**Raymond:** While I was reading those plays, I got a call from a former student of mine named Joseph McGee, who had been living in New York City for about 20 years and had become quite successful in the fabric design and ladies clothing business.

**Joey:** I grew up on a farm in East Texas on the Louisiana border, about 60 miles from Kilgore.

**Raymond:** I've never met anybody like Joey, and I called him Joey, because that's what he called himself when he was a young man in high school.

**Joey:** Well, I love Raymond. He's a wonderful person and a genius. He feels so deeply, I think that's what is his genius. He really can feel.

**Raymond:** He called me that very summer that I was trying to find a play to do, and wanted to know if he could come visit. So, he came to my house and we stayed up late in the evening, talking about things and the past and all. He learned that I was thinking about *Angels in America* and strongly encouraged me to do it because he had seen it on Broadway.

**Joey:** When I saw *Angels in America* in New York, I remember thinking that this is real literature. I remember thinking it's like going to see *Streetcar Named Desire* something.

**Raymond:** I was telling him the reasons why I was afraid to do it. Joseph is not one to be put off. He has an idea about things. [chuckles]

**Joey:** “Are you fucking going to do a meaningful play or you not?" I think it came down to that. It was like, “Are you going to do something that's really something?” [unintelligible 00:08:32] a play, you can't do *Our Town* every year.

**Raymond:** I guess that's all the encouragement I needed, was someone to say, “Yeah, do it.”

**Joey:** “You've got to do this thing. You've got to do it.”

**Raymond:** And then he told me, to my surprise that he wanted to come back to Texas and re-enroll in Kilgore College, which is a junior college, to finish his degree because he had only gone for one year back in the 80s. And I said, “Are you sure? It's been, what, 19 years since you were here? You may find it difficult. You'll feel older than the other students. You'll be twice their age.”

**Joey:** I really didn't know what to do with myself and I didn't feel like going back to my career would be the best thing for my addiction. I started using coke when I was 35. Oh, God, it was great for like a year, and then I crossed the line. Oh, my goodness. Wasn't too good. But I had been in all this different treatment, all this rehabs. One in Mississippi, then I went to one in Arizona and then I went to one in Santa Fe, and I had been to all these really great treatment centers. And the whole idea of going to East Texas was to heal old wounds.

**John:** What wounds?

**Joey:** I think growing up gay on a farm, being an athlete, being president of student council, being all the things you are, but you know underneath that you're gay and you know that somehow, "Still, I'm not good enough," I thought going back there would make me feel all right about who I was as a child growing up in East Texas, and that was just delusional.

**Raymond:** I wrote a letter to the president of the college. I copied that letter to the vice presidents, to my dean. "I've chosen this play as the first play of the semester, and it will be controversial," and I didn't hear from any of them. None of them wrote me back. So, I assumed that meant to go ahead. And then, I scheduled auditions. When they showed up for auditions, I gave them sides to read. Two of the students in the group came up to me and handed me the script and said, “I'm not comfortable working on this play.” And I said, “That's fine. That's absolutely fine. Thank you for coming.” It wasn't a surprise at all. In fact, I wondered if I would have enough people audition to even do the play.

**Joey:** Raymond had us all stand at the back of the auditorium, and the Van Cliburn Auditorium is this beautiful, small auditorium. That's really incredible. It's like half in the round. It's really beautiful. And he had each person auditioning say, “I am who I am,” as loud as they could.

**Justin:** My name is Justin Adams, and I am who I am.

**John:** Do you want to stand up, maybe? You could take your headphones off and shout.

**Justin:** [laughs] [screams] My name is Justin Adams, and I am who I am.

**Raymond:** Justin was a local high school boy who had played baseball until he got injured, I think. He came from a very, very conservative Baptist background. His parents had threatened to disown him if he participated in the play.

**Justin:** It was my mother that was the most actively trying to get me to not do it. She was worried. I wouldn't say she was angry. I would say she was very, very frightened.

**Raymond:** Most of us who do what I do, teach college and direct a theater program, we know the students we have quite well. So, I knew that Justin would be Joe Pitt. I knew that before the auditions.

The character, Joe Pitt, is a young married man living in New York, a lawyer, who is Mormon and is discovering painfully and unwillingly that he may be gay.

**Justin:** “Does it make any difference that I might be one thing deep within, no matter how wrong or ugly that thing is so long as I have fought with everything I have to kill it?”

**Joey:** Joey, you want me to read this now? You'll read this thing. The script? Oh, let me just rehearse a little bit more about this because I haven't read this in 20 years.

**Raymond:** I cast Joseph as Prior Walter. Prior Walter is one of the main characters in the play. Early on in the play, he discovers that he has AIDS. His partner can't stand the reality of it and decides to abandon him.

**Joey:** “I want Louis. I want my fucking boyfriend. Where the fuck is he? I'm dying. I'm dying. Where's Louis?”

**Raymond:** I actually thought he fits the role quite well. Joseph is very honest, disarmingly. He's blunt and abrupt. I thought Prior needed to be honest but.

**Joey:** I never thought I was going to be cast as Prior. I was shocked by that. And I was like, “Really?” I believed him. Prior is a special role.

**Raymond:** and he showed up the next day and had shaved his head, all of his hair, he was bald as me, because he thought Prior should be. There were at least 12 to 15 in the cast itself, and another 5 or 6 who were crew. We started rehearsals. I was exhilarated because the play rehearses so easily. I mean, it's a difficult play to do, but it's written so well, that it's easy. And the students loved it.

**Jennifer:** Well, yeah, I remember sitting with Raymond and taking notes.

**Raymond:** I picked Jennifer Handy to be the stage manager.

**Jennifer:** I'm Jennifer Ann Handy. Well, a stage manager is responsible for keeping the production on track. You're there to make sure that people are hitting their marks, that the props are in place backstage, that they're going to get where they need to, that the lighting and sound cues are hitting correctly. Yeah, you're just kind of like a stage mom. [laughs]

**John:** What did you know about the play?

**Jennifer:** Not much. I just kind of remember understanding that the political conversation was really more inflammatory than the homosexual component. But it would be the homosexual component that would trigger our community. I mean, you didn't even say gay. If you knew somebody was gay, you call them 'funny' or 'fruity'. I didn't know any gay couples that were out and safe and comfortable as a couple at all.

**John:** What were the scenes that you cut?

**Raymond:** There's one in which two men are supposedly in Central Park having sex, and is pretty graphic about a broken condom and all that kind of thing. [chuckles] There's no way I could do that. So, I cut that scene out, and I kept a few of the lines, but they were said offstage.

**Justin:** You would just hear that “[sexually panting] Don't stop.” I had to kiss the character, Louis. The actual act of kissing a man was a line I had to cross for myself as it was. Yeah, it got, of course, easier, more natural, as anything does if you repeat it.

[somber music]

**Raymond:** Our stage is very small. We have no money. The actors themselves are also the stage craft crew, so they had to build the set themselves. Costumes were the easiest part because Joseph did them.

**Joey:** All the fabrics came from our fashion company, our textile company.

**Justin:** The fabric of the Angel was very high dollar white silk that Joey demanded.

**Raymond:** The appearance of the Angel is a giant climax in this play. The techs called for her to come crashing through the ceiling in Prior's bedroom. That made me laugh.

**Jennifer:** I mean, we were very low tech. The wings were too heavy to wear, so they were mounted on a stand, and then the actress who played the Angel, she would go and stand in front of it on a platform, and then the curtain would open to reveal the Angel. I kind of feel like that was our finale.

**Raymond:** For the first few days, things were going very well, very smoothly and very encouraging. I was feeling very good about the readthroughs. And about the very first scene work that we did, they just threw themselves into it with no questions and no hesitation. That didn't last long.

[upbeat music]

**Raymond:** Joseph had a very hard time, as he would admit, learning lines. He would tell me, “Oh, I know them. I know them.” Every time I would say something about it. “I went through this before I got here tonight. And I was perfect. I know them all.” Well, in theater terms, we call that “bedroom perfect.” My first response was to forgive and work with him individually because I love Joey and he had been there before and I had a long history with him and we were good friends. He'll come through. That just got worse and worse, little by little worse and worse.

**Justin:** The lines were not being learned at a sufficient level. We got into fights during some of the split-scene dialogues.

**Raymond:** They go back and forth and back and forth very rapidly, and that timing is crucial. Joey could never get it.

**Justin:** He's cued. You wait. He remembers.

**Raymond:** The other actors could only tolerate so many stops when he would miss a line or miss a cue. It began to be an uncomfortable and unpleasant environment after a while.

**Joey:** I don't know who Prior Walter is. I don't know who he is. I couldn't become that character. Had too many issues.

**John:** Do you remember maybe doing a scene with Joseph where he did really well and you thought like--

**Raymond:** Yes.

**John:** Yeah, can you tell me about that? And can you tell me what scene if you remember?

**Raymond:** I will. I can't recall the lines, but Prior is sitting at a dressing table over the mirror.

**Joey:** I'm ready for my closeup, Mr. DeMille. One wants to move through life with elegance--"

**Raymond:** To stage that, he faces directly forward toward the audience, and the mirror, of course, at the dressing table is invisible.

**Joey:** “Like a rare bloom, a zebra orchid.”

**Raymond:** So, he's staring into the audience as if he were looking into a mirror.

**Joey:** “But one so seldom gets what one wants does one--

**Raymond:** And he's talking to himself, and it's a very dramatic touching moment.

**Joey:** “One dies at 30. Robbed up decades of majesty. Fuck this shit. I look like a corpse. A corpsette. Oh, my queen, you know you've hit rock bottom, when even drag is a drag.”

**Raymond:** And it just wasn't working. So, I walked down to the front of the theater and stood right at the edge of the stage sort of eye level with his knees. I started whispering to him. I was trying to prompt him to internalize the lines to find a way to identify with that moment in his own life. He was staring into my eyes and tears just began to well up and flow down his cheeks. I've always thought of Joseph as being irrepressible, larger than life. But in that moment, he said nothing, and he looked like an injured child. A damaged man. And he was. But I never saw that till then, and I've never seen it since.

**Jennifer:** I don't think I felt bad for him. I don't think that I would have understood how to feel bad for him at that time in my life. I don't know how to explain that. It was just super frustrating, specifically with all the extra pressure that was going on from the outside media and protesty things that were happening.

**John:** So, how does the controversy in town start?

**Raymond:** Very simple answer. The college newspaper, which was called The Flare routinely would come and get an interview with me to find out what the show was about. And so, I told the reporter what it was going to be, and he wanted the script to read. So, I gave him the script. On the front cover of Tony Kushner’s script for *Angels in America*, it says *Angels in America*: *Millennium Approaches*. That's the title, and then under there, it says *A Gay Fantasia*. The paper came out later that week, and the bold headline of the paper was *A Gay Fantasia*. And I thought, “Oh boy. I'm in for it now.”

[upbeat music]

**Glynn:** Black out. When we return, Raymond and his students they do have bigger problems than simply learning their lives. Stay tuned.

[upbeat music]

**Glynn:** Welcome back to Snap Judgment, the Greetings, Prophet! episode. Now, sensitive listeners should be advised that the story in context contains references to both drugs and sex, along with explicit language, including homophobic slurs. When last we left, Raymond Caldwell’s junior college production of *Angels in America* in the small East Texas town of Kilgore has received some unwanted attention. Lights up on Raymond reading the school newspaper in his office.

**Raymond:** The bold headline of the paper was *A Gay Fantasia*. And I thought, “Oh, boy. I'm in for it now.” As soon as one of the pastors of one of the Baptist churches in town saw the paper, he wrote a letter to the editor of the newspaper.

**Justin:** A pretty damning letter to the editor, questioning Raymond sexuality publicly.

**Raymond:** I don't know if it was that first letter or a subsequent letter in which the author asked me to move to San Francisco, where I would be more comfortable. It was a very painful experience for my wife, and it did create some discussions between us as to why I'm doing this play. Couldn't I have done something else? She asked me if I identified personally with any of the characters. Yes, I identify with parts of all of them. But that's not unusual. I know what she meant, of course. What she was implying was, “Are you gay? Is your life in the place where Joe Pitt's is in the play?” “No.” “Are you suffering from AIDS?” “No.”

**John:** Were you hurt by that? Were you hurt that she--

**Raymond:** I don't think I was. I think she wanted to know those things. I would want to know too, if she were doing the play, [chuckles] I'd ask the same questions. I got phone calls, threats. I got letters in the mail. The one I got first was typed, and came to my home address, which was frightening. Unsigned, of course, but it said on the inside, “You fucking asshole. I hope you die of AIDS too.” Quite a few faculty members that I had known and worked with for a long time and considered friends, no longer spoke to me. They never spoke to me again. A woman who had been a friend of mine for years, she was a teacher at the college. She wrote me a long letter that was heartbreaking. She let me know that I was a big disappointment to her, that I was not a good person, that I was a threat to God. People started calling the college switchboard at such a rate that they had to create a whole new line on campus for phone calls.

**Jennifer:** My student job was working the box office. It was a little room in front of Raymond's office. I had a window, cash register and phone. I took several calls from really angry people from the community. I can't say that anyone threatened my life, but they were definitely threatening Raymond's life. This was daily, this energy was just coming at us daily. And we were just theater kid.

**Raymond:** We lost a $50,000 grant, because they voted to rescind it after the play.

**Joey:** Oh, they were pulling money left and right. I went in there to the president's office and pounded my fist on the desk and said, “You know what? You want to fuck with me? You're going to get trouble.” I also called the ACLU.

**Raymond:** Right at that point, I had a phone call in my office, and it was from the ACLU. And they said, “We hear you're having some trouble down there. We also know there's some discussion of shutting down your play.” And I said, “Yes, there is discussion.” “Well, that's not going to happen, we filed an injunction against the college. And by the time that works its way through court, the play will be over. Tell your president that.” I did not know at the time that Joseph had contacted them. I wouldn't have known to call them. I just wouldn’t have. So, he, yes, saved the play.

**Justin:** All of this takes place over, what. two weeks? Two and a half weeks?

**Raymond:** They started posting signs outside their churches, say no to the gay play at KC.

**Jennifer:** There were marquees on churches all over that said things like, “God doesn't hate the sinner, just the sin.”

**Joey:** I remember going to my car and on the window shield in my wipers, there was a little flyer from Heritage Baptist Church.

**Jennifer:** “It would be better to give honor to a maggot than [bleep]. God has prepared a place for these cursed ‘Angels in America,’ a place of everlasting torment called hell. Like it or lump it, this is the way it is in Texas.” It was just crazy. It was like a circus. And then before we knew that it was crazy, buses were coming up.

**Raymond:** It was a giant school bus. One of the longest ones I'd ever seen. And they had painted it solid black.

**Jennifer:** This crazy man with this gray scraggly beard hanging out the window, telling everyone that they're going to go to hell.

**Joey:** They painted black buses that said, “God hates [bleep] just want your children.”

**Raymond:** It accused the Rangerettes, which is what Kilgore College is known for. They're the world's first drill team for football games. It accused them of being harlots, and he drove round and round and round the campus for days.

**Jennifer:** And it was just like, “Wow, I mean, these are the people that you sit next to your whole life in church.” And that feeling that like, “Oh, no. Do those people know my grandparents?”

**Justin:** I was spit at, my brother got bullied at school, because I was in the play. I was told I was going to hell many times. I was told that I used to be a fairly decent boy.

**Joey:** Yeah, this woman comes up to me and says, “You're that homosexual, and you want to molest my little boys,” she said to me. If someone comes up to you and says something like that to you, I'm telling you, you're not going to like it. You can't just laugh at it if you're gay. You have to take it seriously, because she's attacking who I am at the very core.

**Raymond:** Joseph had been gone since 1980. He couldn't believe the small-mindedness that he had left behind that it still existed.

**Joey:** You've got all these people down east Texas looking at you saying, "You're fucking gay, you're all these things.” And they're supposed to get up and act partly about what they're accusing me of being that I'm not, and I had trouble with that. I had trouble with that.

**Raymond:** He was living with my associate who has a single man who lives in an apartment by himself. And he had a big giant Rottweiler named Brutus.

**Joey:** Brutus, as in the Shakespearean play, he had a little bit of Iago in him as well. I took Brutus with me everywhere. Well, I think Brutus was my only friend, first of all.

**Jennifer:** It's a Rottweiler, and it was kind of scary. You couldn't pet him or anything. [chuckles]

**Joey:** No one, no one, I mean no one would get near you when you are with that dog. I'd go up to anywhere and people would just fly.

**Raymond:** He became agitated in a way that no one else did. He seemed to lose focus once again and was on edge. Everything was working against him. And he was disappointed in everything that he thought was going to be good. So, he just sort of disintegrated.

**Jennifer:** I mean, I just remember like being pretty aware that he was on something.

**Raymond:** My suspicion is that he had fallen off the wagon and was coming to rehearsals, not bringing 100%.

**Joey:** I kept a secret from everybody. I was so ashamed that I was doing it, but listen, you know what? I'm an addict through and through. And that's it. I can't drink a lot and learn lines. I couldn't get my lines, and Prior has so many lines. I mean, he's the lead in the play after all, and it's a long play. You're trying to learn these lines and you're drinking all the time and you're doing this, it was a mess. Just a mess, a mess, mess, mess, mess, mess, mess.

**Raymond:** I thought it was my fault. I shouldn't have cast him. I should have known he had these problems, because I did know. And I was trying to save him. I was trying to help him. And I knew that's what he wanted.

**Justin:** It was a fairly swift decline. As he was declining, obviously, the opening night was approaching, tension was rising. And yeah, you have to also understand too he's going down there playing Prior. Acting can really get into you. I mean, Prior is dying of AIDS. That was going on for Joey too.

**Raymond:** He had lived through the AIDS crisis in New York City, and had ministered to many sick people as a volunteer.

**Joey:** I went to work for Gay Men's Health Crisis in 1985 before you knew how you got it. I had three people that I watch die. Oh, God, the way they died too, all of them were just horrible deaths, terrible deaths. Terrible infections, pain, lots of pain, all that. And they died of shame. They died of shame. I think a lot of about Angels is about also, this was supposed to be a curse from God. This was a curse from God that you got because you're no good.

**Raymond:** The other students, they were doing a play. They were having fun doing a play. They were enjoying being rebellious and causing controversy. He saw it as something much more important than that.

**Jennifer:** I mean, the murmurings were something's not right, and this isn't really fair, and we're all committed on a certain level, and he's not showing the same level of commitment.

**Justin:** I just couldn't take it anymore. I felt the pressure of the show coming, and we weren't getting there. To me, it was becoming clear we were not going to get there. So, at some point, what do you do? You have to make a decision.

**Jennifer:** Yes, I do remember this scene, Justin just kind of snapped.

**Raymond:** We're to the point where time has run out. We were in the theater, basically, in so many words, "I've discussed this with everyone, and we've come together and discussed this and feel like you are not coming together strong enough in rehearsals. You don't know your lines.” And I do remember opening it up to the group and being like, “Right, guys?” Crickets.

**Joey:** No, that never happened. That is not true at all. There was never a confrontation with that cast are never ever, ever, ever, ever. That never happened. Ever.

**Raymond:** We got into a little tit for tat. He and I did.

**Joey:** I don't care what they're saying, that never happened.

**Raymond:** At some point, he pulled out a CD player. In the heated argument and moment, I remember him getting us to stop and listen to Nina Simone's *Please Don't Let Me Be Misunderstood.*

**Joey:** I did that before rehearsals one night. That's true, I did that.

[Nina Simone *- Don't Let Me Be Misunderstood* playing]

**Joey:** We went to rehearsals. I played that song with Nina Simone.

[Nina Simone *- Don't Let Me Be Misunderstood* playing]

**Joey:** And I played that song because I felt like these people don't know who I am.

[Nina Simone *- Don't Let Me Be Misunderstood* playing]

**Joey:** I'm supposed to turn into an angel, but I'm not an angel. “Guys, this is such a struggle for me.” But they couldn't relate.

[Nina Simone *- Don't Let Me Be Misunderstood* playing]

**Raymond:** The other cast members led by Justin said, “Can you please do something? We don't think we can do this play successfully if Joseph is not removed or replaced.” And I knew that was true. I had been agonizing over it, but I had a long history with Joseph. I hated to take him out of the play. I did call Joseph in and I told him, “I'm going to have to replace you.” He argued every way he could, got very emotional. “Please, please don't do this. I have friends from New York who have already bought their tickets to come and they're looking forward to seeing me." “I know, I know. I know. But it's not fair to the other people in the play or to the play itself, because you've not yet been able to get through two consecutive scenes without being prompted, and we're just a few days for opening.” He left in a huff.

And the next night after rehearsal, I went back into my office and there were handwritten signs painted on the back of cardboard boxes, red and black slash marks, horrible looking, frightening things. And he had said in one of them, “I hate you, I love you. I want to be you. I want to be anybody, but you.” And they were scattered all through my office standing on their sides. I was a little frightened. And that was very near opening night, like three days before. He just dropped out of the picture, literally.

**Justin:** Disappeared. Yeah, nobody knew where. It was very scary worrying.

[Nina Simone *- Don't Let Me Be Misunderstood* playing]

[upbeat music]

**Glynn:** Snappers, it is not over. After this quick intermission, Raymond’s production of *Angels in America* faces its biggest challenge yet. Stay tuned.

[upbeat music]

Welcome back to Snap Judgment, the Greetings, Prophet! episode. My name is Glynn Washington. And when last we left, a junior college production of *Angels in America* is just about to open. And now, this story in context contains references to both drugs and sex. Now before the big show, Director Raymond Caldwell has just lost his lead actor. Lights up.

**Raymond:** I actually thought about canceling the play. And then. I felt even more guilty, “So, what about all the work the other kids had been doing? The set we'd built, the costumes put together, what about everything?”

[somber music]

**Jennifer:** Raymond brought in a former student from like maybe two years before.

**Raymond:** I called a young man who had been a student of mine the year before. He had never read the play. And I said, “Would you mind considering taking this role over at short notice?” We rehearsed long and hard for the next three days, more than one rehearsal a day, and spent most of the time on his scenes. I just ignored the other scenes that Prior wasn't in, and we just rehearsed those.

**Jennifer:** We did everything we could to just have the scripts available to him, including having people that could whisper lines behind some of the set pieces. We barely had three days. [laughs]

**Justin:** It was crash course, audible, emergency, red alarms, DEFCON 5. Oh, my gosh, opening day, where do my memories start? Outside and inside the theater, everything was so tense.

**Raymond:** It's all a blur in a way to me because it seemed to be happening in double time. I hadn't slept in days. I was exhausted. I had no idea whether the play would work, because we had so few rehearsals with the new actor.

**Justin:** We were trying to finish everything. It wasn't like we'd had all these run throughs and everything was smooth and finally got an audience. It was like, “Oh my gosh, they're here now. We need more time.” You also have to understand we didn't even know if there would be people, because someone had bought out the entire house.

**Raymond:** And it made me furious. I didn't know about it till after the fact, but a local businessman who was quite wealthy, bought every seat that was available for the opening night performance. He did that in hopes of having no audience, that no one would be able to go see the play. So, I said, "Resell them until they're all gone."

**Justin:** We've got two hours, and the police are trying to sweep us out so they can start security. They're sweeping with canine dogs. The metal detectors are starting to get set up.

**Raymond:** What happened was they surrounded the entire block that the theater sits on with policemen, armed policemen. I was instructed to wear a headset, stand at the back of the theater. And when the show began, if there was any disturbance, which they expected, I was to shout at the top of my voice, "Hold," which would indicate to the actors they were to run off stage and go back downstairs and lock themselves back in the dressing rooms.

**Jennifer:** What do you do if someone opens fire in the tiny theater or releases a bomb. If someone just wants to blow everyone up, you're not going to stop them. So, we're all downstairs and it's a cold cinderblock building. We did not like to hang out down there. Normally, it felt like creepy and kind of haunted and everyone was just so somber. We didn't know what we were walking into.

It was just starting to be sunset. It was like dusky. I remember peeking outside at the protesters. They were pretty far distance from us, and there were trees and shrubs and things in the way, but that energy out there was just pulsating. They're mad. We're not safe, “Close the door, close the door.”

**Raymond:** Those protesters were waving those placards wildly and shouting things that were obscene. And the bus, of course, was still driving round and round. So, opening night, I went downstairs just to tell that cast one more time, how proud I was of them and give them a little hope, courage, and they were really revved up, they were so ready to do the play. And Tony wrote to them, Tony Kushner had written a letter. When I read it to them, they were silent. They were just in awe that the playwright who wrote this play has written a letter to them. That was big, big stuff.

**Justin:** “I'm writing to send you all my very best wishes for a splendid opening night and my congratulations and gratitude for the principled stance you've taken.”

**Raymond:** It was a full-page letter. He points out that art has often created controversy, and that truth has often offended people. He mentioned a couple of other productions. I think one was overseas.

**Justin:** “In Bucharest, Romania, a few months ago, an angry mob attacked the theater where *Angels* was being presented and tried to burn the building to the ground.”

**Raymond:** So, he was letting them know that they were joining a rank of company that they should be proud of.

**Justin:** “These people are bullies, and bullies must be defied. And that's what you're doing. Go and talk to the Angels. Yours, Tony Kushner.”

**Raymond:** I left them to go back upstairs thinking I would do to go on stage to apologize because we were 30 minutes late getting started because of all the metal detectors. I looked out the window of my office, and there was a line going all the way across the front of the theater, around the corner, down the block, as far as you could see on the sidewalk, people waiting to get in. A lot of the people who were in line coming into the theater were same-sex couples I never seen, never heard of. They’d come from all over to see the play. I looked out there and saw that and my knees gave way. I just lost control of my legs and just fell onto the sofa.

**Justin:** We're there. We're all in the wings waiting to go on. It's all been building to this.

**Jennifer:** Once we are all in and we're ready to go, and Raymond gave an introduction, I feel like I was backstage for that. I was probably getting ready.

**Raymond:** And the minute I opened the door, and they saw me come in to go walk up onto the apron of the stage, the entire audience [applause] [sobbing] the entire audience rose to its feet and shouted and started applauding. [applause] They wouldn't stop. And I gestured on stage with my left had to thank the cast, they did the same thing again, [sobbing] they stood again and applauded again. It's hard to talk about, I'm sorry. [chuckles] I don't know. It's a great sense of gratitude. A disbelief that people, many of whom I did not know, would feel so empathetic to not only me, but to the kids, and the effort we made to do something.

**John:** So, Joseph was there opening night. Tell me about that.

**Raymond:** Well, I was so caught up in all the other stuff that I didn't notice when Joseph came in.

**Joey:** I always show up when it's absolutely necessary. Well, I have my pride. It was like, “Hey, look, folks, this is happening because of me. This will not be happening without me.”

**Jennifer:** I don't remember if I saw him, but I remember hearing that he was there and just being like, “No way.”

**Justin:** Yeah, he pulls up in this bullet-ridden truck. It had been smashed in on the front. And they're also like seven or eight bullet holes in the driver's side door.

**Joey:** I went to cop drugs, and they blew up the cab of my pickup, bullet holes all in that thing, all through the inch, one went right in front of me. That's Texas, they don't mess around down there.

**Raymond:** I was standing at the back of the house during the performance. I saw him sitting there right in the front row. I tried to keep my eye on him because I wasn't sure how he would react. I couldn't tell from his expressions whether he was supporting the cast or resenting them.

**Joey:** I definitely wanted to be there for them. I definitely wanted them to know how proud I was of them, that they had been able to achieve this and get through this really tumultuous time. They were really incredible.

**Raymond:** As soon as the house lights went down, I felt like my heart was going to come out of my chest. The opening scene of the play is a funeral being conducted by a Jewish rabbi. There's a silence, and then you hear this plaintive music.

[plaintive music]

**Raymond:** It seems like forever to me before the lights would come up.

[play begins]

**Justin:** I remember policemen on either side of the wings, video cameras recording the audience.

**Jennifer:** I was up in the catwalk a significant amount of the time. A true fact of the matter is if they wanted to shut us down, they should have called the fire marshal because we had people sitting in the aisles. They weren't even in seats.

**Raymond:** I remember seeing Justin, as good as an actor as he was even at that age, he was shaking like elite.

**Justin:** I did a lot of bacting.

[play continues playing in the background]

**Justin:** I kept turning my back to the other actor, and then when they wanted to get my attention, I'd like do the half turn, give them my profile very dramatically. And if I wanted to get very serious, I would say something [in a strong tone] like this.

**Raymond:** There were many moments that I watched and thought, “Oh, goodness, can I fast forward?” They were freshmen and sophomores. In some cases, this was their first play ever. The same with the Angel appearing at the end was a huge worry, of course. I was very anxious about that, knowing it's coming, knowing we'd only done it two or three times.

[play continues playing in the background]

**Raymond:** Prior, one of the main characters, is alone in his bed and begins having hallucinations? We don't know. Hearing voices? We don't know. So, he did that. And I thought, “So far so good.” And then, the black curtain parted at the back and a light came on, which was almost blinding. And there she stands, arms outstretched, waves outstretched, and speaks very simple lines.

**Jennifer:** “Greetings, Prophet!”

**Joey:** “The great work begins.”

**Justin:** “The great work begins.”

**Raymond:** “A messenger has arrived.”

[play continues playing in the background]

[upbeat music]

**Glynn:** That's curtain. That’s curtain. Everyone, take a bow. Thank you to Joseph Magee, Justin Adams, Jennifer Ann Handy, and the rest of the cast and crew of *Angels in America*, Kilgore College, 1999. And thanks especially to Raymond Caldwell, who just retired after 54 years of teaching theatre.

**Raymond:** I didn't have an agenda other than to offer my students, the opportunity to see the power of theater. And they did.

**Glynn:** This story just based on the Texas Monthly magazine article, *When ‘Angels in America’ Came to East Texas* by Wes Ferguson. Special thanks also to the Texas Shakespeare Festival, to Matthew Simpson, Helena de Groot, Kyle Henry, Katie Song and Colin Hyer. The original score for this story was by Renzo Gorrio. It was produced by John Fecile.

[upbeat music]

**Glynn:** Was that a story, ladies and gentlemen? Are you not entertained? For more amazing stories, subscribe to the Snap Judgment podcast because it might just change your life. If you love Snap storytelling, storytelling from the heart, the mind, the soul, support it. Go to *patreon.com/snapjudgment*. Join the league of the world's most amazing people that keep the Snap train running, *patreon.com/snapjudgment*. If you want to let the world know that you Snap, get yourself some Snap stuff. The Snap Studio Shop is finally here, s*napjudgment.org/shop.* Get the t-shirt of your dreams, get a Snap pin. *Snapjudgment.org/snap.*

Snap was brought to you by the team that never needs a hook to pull them off stage. None of us need that. Of course, except for the uber producer, Mr. Mark Restich. There's Pat Mesiti-Miller, Anna Sussman, Renzo Gorrio, John Fecile, Shaina Shealy, Marisa Dodge, Nikka Singh, Teo Ducot, Flo Wiley, Nancy López, Regina Bediako.

Now, this is not the news. No way is this the news. In fact, even if you get all your lines, you get a big number, even as your grandmother shakes her head from the front row, and you’d still, still not be as far away from the news as this is, but this is PRX.

[upbeat music]

*[Transcript provided by SpeechDocs Podcast Transcription]*