

For Immediate Release

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Cynthia López, clopez@pov.org, 646-729-4748 (cell)Neyda Martinez, neyda@pov.org; Cathy Fisher, cfisher@pov.orgP.O.V. online pressroom: www.pbs.org/pov/pressroom**P.O.V.'s "Wrestling With Angels: Playwright Tony Kushner"
Reveals the Man Behind the Fierce Social Critic,
Wednesday, Dec. 12 in Special Broadcast on PBS**

Oscar-winning Director Freida Lee Mock Profiles the Playwright Whose
'Angels in America' Shook Up 1990s America

Meryl Streep, Emma Thompson, Mike Nichols, Maurice Sendak Featured

Ladies and gentlemen, meet Tony Kushner. Since the early 1990s breakthrough of his two-part epic, "Angels in America" – subsequently made into a hit miniseries – Kushner has emerged as one of the country's leading playwrights. With his cutting wit and penchant for uncomfortable opinions, Kushner has earned a Pulitzer, Emmy and two Tony Awards – and a reputation running the gamut from charming to demanding and unpredictable.

Yet the man portrayed in **Wrestling With Angels: Playwright Tony Kushner**, the new documentary from Oscar-winning director Freida Lee Mock having its national broadcast premiere on public television's **P.O.V.** series, is resolutely upbeat, productive, at ease with himself, and tender with family and friends. Kushner can even be described as amazingly relaxed for someone whose days are a blur of disparate activities united by his drive both to "speak the truth" and to succeed as an artist – never mind being a gay progressive who grew up in the South.

P.O.V.'s special broadcast presentation of **Wrestling With Angels: Playwright Tony Kushner** premieres on **Wednesday, Dec. 12, 2007** at 9 p.m. on PBS, concluding the series' 20th season. (Check local listings.) American television's longest-running independent documentary series, P.O.V. is public television's premier showcase for point-of-view, nonfiction films, and is a 2007 recipient of a Special News & Documentary Emmy Award for Excellence in Television Documentary Filmmaking.

As she demonstrated in her 1996 Oscar-winning P.O.V. film, **Maya Lin: A Strong Clear Vision**, (about the designer of the Vietnam Memorial) director Mock has a natural feel for the world of artists. In **Wrestling With Angels**, she includes extended performances and readings from Kushner's plays and musicals, with appearances and commentary from such theatrical lights as actresses Marcia Gay Harden, Meryl Streep, Emma Thompson and Tonya Pinkins, directors Mike Nichols, George C. Wolfe and Oskar Eustis, and writer/artist Maurice Sendak.

Mock tells Kushner's story in a three-act with epilogue structure that opens not at the beginning, nor with the play that made Kushner a force to reckon with. Rather, in "Act 1: Citizen of the World," she begins with Kushner today – a whirlwind of speech-

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giving, panel-sitting, demonstrating, writing and weathering the premiere and mixed reviews accorded his then-newest work, "Homebody/Kabul."

Mock's approach creates a dramatic perspective. **Wrestling With Angels** is more than a retrospective account of a powerful play and its impact. It is a portrait in motion of a passionate, introspective artist and energetic political activist whose work continues to unfold.

In Act 1, "As a Citizen of the World," *vérité* slices of Kushner's public life frame the behind-the-scenes drama of "Homebody/Kabul," written before Sept. 11 and staged afterwards. Aside from 9/11's impact on Kushner, a New Yorker by choice, the event revealed the new play's prescience while also throwing it into a more challenging light. Kushner's spirits soar as the premiere approaches and he anticipates great success. Despite a few raves, however, reaction is mixed, and Kushner experiences the reverse of the previous day's soaring expectations. Collaborators and friends convince him to persevere with the play, which went on to London, Los Angeles, Seattle and Berkeley.

Act 2, "Mama, I'm a Homosexual, Mama," takes us back to the beginning, to the Deep South district of Lake Charles, La. By his own account, Kushner had a happy childhood, nurtured by musician parents and surrounded by artistic siblings. Nor does he seem to have suffered much for growing up Jewish in the South. But this typical – if unusually artistic and liberal – suburban upbringing was shadowed by an early recognition by both son and father that the former might be gay. And for all the liberal environment of the household, both father and son, in their own ways, struggled with the boy's homosexuality. When Kushner was at Columbia – studying with internationally renowned director/writer Carl Weber – his father, Bill, wrote him that if he were Tchaikovsky's father, he couldn't be proud because Tchaikovsky was a gay. When Kushner came out to his mother, she "cried for six months until I finally said, 'I'm beginning to feel like you are mourning somebody,'" he says.

Act 2 also takes us through Kushner's early artistic development, including his fortuitous encounter with Oskar Eustis, now director of New York's renowned Public Theater and then director of San Francisco's Eureka Theater, who commissioned Kushner to write the play that became the seven-hour epic "Angels in America, A Gay Fantasia on National Themes," which premiered May 1991 at the Eureka and went to Broadway in 1993.

Act 3, "Collective Action to Overcome Injustice," resumes with Kushner in full stride in 2003-2004, breaking into musical theater in typically untypical ways. The film provides a snapshot of Kushner's collaboration with acclaimed children's writer and illustrator Maurice Sendak. They take on an unlikely musical project, the chilling "Brundibar," which recalls a play staged by the Nazis at the infamous Theresienstadt concentration camp in Czechoslovakia for propaganda purposes, featuring dozens of Jewish children shortly destined for the gas chambers. In a particularly touching moment, Ela Weissberger, one of the children who survived, expresses her gratitude. We are also brought into the creative process and ambitions behind Kushner's 2003 Broadway musical, "Caroline, Or Change," the autobiographical story of a young boy's relationship with the black maid (played by Tonya Pinkins) working for his Southern Jewish family at the height of the Civil Rights era, directed by George C. Wolfe.

The Epilogue to **Wrestling With Angels** is entitled "Action Can Change the Course of Things," a resolute coda for a man who feels the artist has "an ethical obligation not to despair, to look for hope," as he explains to students at Southwestern University in Georgetown, Texas, nine days before the 2004 presidential election. It also explains an artist who, despite obsessing over themes as uncomfortable as war, race, class conflict, AIDS, gay and lesbian rights and genocide, struggles to reach – and believes he can reach – a popular audience.

“The time frame of **Wrestling With Angels**, during which I essentially stalked him all over the country, were immensely active for Kushner with the production of new plays, books, master classes and community work,” says director Mock. “These activities are the building-blocks through which the audience will come, I hope, to understand not only Kushner’s artistry, but the creative process in general, and the difference one artist can make in inspiring us to engage the moral and political issues of our times.”

Wrestling With Angels is a production of the American Film Foundation and Sanders & Mock Productions, with major funding by the National Endowment for the Arts, Helen and Peter Bing and Morgan B. Lee.

About the filmmaker:

Freida Lee Mock

Director/Writer/Producer

Mock is an Academy and Emmy Award winning filmmaker who received the Oscar for the feature documentary **Maya Lin: A Strong Clear Vision**, which premiered on P.O.V. in 1996. She followed this with the feature documentary “Return With Honor,” about American fighter pilots surviving as POWs in North Vietnam for almost nine years. The film was presented theatrically by Tom Hanks and Playtone after its Sundance premiere. She has been nominated for an Oscar for the short documentaries “Sing!,” “Rose Kennedy: A Life to Remember,” “Never Give Up,” and “To Live or Let Die.” Mock graduated in history from University of California, at Berkeley and attended UC Berkeley’s Hastings College of Law. She lives in Santa Monica, Calif.

Credits:

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| Director/writer/producer: | Freida Lee Mock |
| Executive Producer: | Terry Sanders |
| Cinematography: | Eddie Marritz, Don Lenzer, Bestor Cram, Terry Sanders |
| Editor: | Anne Stein |
| Original Music: | Jeanine Tesori |

Running Time: 116:46

Festivals:

- World Premiere, Sundance Film Festival, January 2006
- Cleveland International Film Festival, Director’s Spotlight Award, March 2006
- Sarasota International Film Festival, April 2006
- Full Frame Film Festival, April 2006
- Toronto Jewish Film Festival, May 2006
- Seattle International Film Festival, Lena Sharpe Women In Cinema Award, June 2006
- Nantucket International Film Festival, June 2006
- Provincetown Film Festival, June 2006
- San Francisco Frameline International Film Festival, June 2006
- Los Angeles Gala Premiere, Outfest Festival, July 2006
- Munich International Film Festival, July 2006
- San Francisco Jewish Film Festival, August 2006
- Austin Film Festival, October 2006

POV 20

Produced by American Documentary, Inc. and celebrating its 20th season on PBS in 2007, the award-winning P.O.V. series is the longest-running showcase on television to feature the work of America's best contemporary-issue independent filmmakers. Airing Tuesdays at 10 p.m., June through September, with primetime specials during the year, P.O.V. has brought nearly 250 award-winning documentaries to millions nationwide, and now has a Webby Award-winning online series, *P.O.V.'s Borders*. Since 1988, P.O.V. has pioneered the art of presentation and outreach using independent nonfiction media to build new communities in conversation about today's most pressing social issues. More information about P.O.V is available online at www.pbs.org/pov.

P.O.V. Interactive (www.pbs.org/pov)

P.O.V.'s award-winning Web department produces special features for every P.O.V. presentation, extending the life of P.O.V. films through filmmaker interviews, story updates, podcasts, streaming video, and community-based and educational content that involves viewers in activities and feedback. P.O.V. Interactive produces our Web-only showcase for interactive storytelling, *P.O.V.'s Borders*. In addition, www.pbs.org/pov houses *Talking Back*, where viewers can comment on P.O.V. programs, engage in dialogue and link to further resources. The P.O.V. Web site and P.O.V. archives, including special sites from previous broadcasts, form a unique and extensive online resource for documentary storytelling.

P.O.V. Community Engagement and Education

P.O.V. provides Discussion Guides for all films as well as curriculum-based P.O.V. Lesson Plans for select films to promote the use of independent media among varied constituencies. Available free online, these original materials ensure the ongoing use of P.O.V.'s documentaries with educators, community workers, opinion leaders and general audiences. P.O.V. works closely with local PBS stations to partner with museums, libraries, schools and community-based organizations to raise awareness of the issues in P.O.V.'s films. P.O.V.'s *Youth Views* expands these efforts by working with youth-service organizations.

Major funding for P.O.V. is provided by the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, the National Endowment for the Arts, the New York State Council on the Arts, the Ford Foundation, the Educational Foundation of America, PBS and public television viewers. Funding for P.O.V.'s *Diverse Voices Project* is provided by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, with additional support from JPMorgan Chase Foundation, the official sponsor of P.O.V.'s 20th Anniversary Campaign. P.O.V. is presented by a consortium of public television stations, including KCET Los Angeles, WGBH Boston, and Thirteen/WNET New York.

American Documentary, Inc. (www.americandocumentary.org)

American Documentary, Inc. (AmDoc) is a multimedia company dedicated to creating, identifying and presenting contemporary stories that express opinions and perspectives rarely featured in mainstream media outlets. AmDoc is a catalyst for public culture, developing collaborative strategic engagement activities around socially relevant content on television, online and in community settings. These activities are designed to trigger action, from dialogue and feedback to educational opportunities and community participation. Simon Kilmurry is executive director of American Documentary | P.O.V.

DVD REQUESTS: Please note that a broadcast version of this film is available upon request, as the film may be edited to comply with new FCC regulations.