

Kafka, Divided and Onstage

Theater

Dara Horn | Fri. Oct 20, 2006

It is mainly Jewish readers who think of Kafka as a Jewish writer. This isn't a matter of possessiveness, the way one claims a sports hero for an ethnic group — after all, if one wanted to claim a writer to carry the Jews into world literature, would it be asking too much to pick someone, well, happier? — but rather a matter of Kafka's work itself. Jewish readers cannot help but hear the echoes of the Dreyfus Affair in "In the Penal Colony," or those of the blood libel in "The Trial"; such readers see in Kafka's famous cockroach a horrifying caricature of the way others have so often seen them — and worse, the way they sometimes see themselves. Nor is this awareness mere suspicion. Though none of his published works mention it explicitly, Kafka's private letters and diaries reveal an interest in Jewish identity verging on obsession.

But Kafka's broader fame comes from the point where this obsession merges with more ordinary fears, making non-Jewish readers see his work as expressing an abstract "existential" dread, rather than the very real dread that defined European Jewish existence. It is with this secret appreciation that Jewish audiences might approach "The Great Conjuror," a new play about Kafka — and wonder, as Kafka himself did, whether the public or the private Kafka is more real.

Fluid Motion Theater & Film, a company that produces dramatic reinventions of classic literary works, is behind the new production, playing at The Kirk Theatre in New York from October 20 to November 4, which radically reimagines the overlap between Kafka's oeuvre and his private life. (Full disclosure: Fluid Motion Theater & Film is partly run by a friend.) Playwright Christine Simpson was drawn to the subject after reading Kafka's letters to Felice Bauer, the woman to whom he was twice engaged but never married.

"What really fascinated me was how powerful his words were," Simpson said. "They saw each other for a total of a month over five years, but he managed to repeatedly win her over just with words." The title, "The Great Conjuror," is a description of Kafka from his editor and friend Max Brod, a writer steeped in Jewish culture, who may have borrowed the expression from the I.L. Peretz story of a "conjuror" whose work could be trickery or divine creation — or, at the halfway point, art.

Kafka was never a typical writer, and "The Great Conjuror" is not a typical play. The role of Kafka is divided between three actors: K, the man himself (part biographical, part fictional); N, the "narrative voice," a female character whose lines are drawn from Kafka's prose; and G(regor), the "bug," the imaginative force who rejects the limits imposed by K's life. "In one of his letters to Felice Bauer, Kafka says that he himself is divided, that there is the outer self and then the self that is only concerned with writing," Simpson explained. "Casting different actors seemed like a wonderful way to show that divide."

The set, too, is divided: A foreground, furnished with a simple table and chair, represents Kafka's actual life, while a background "forest" (behind a scrim) represents the creative world of his work. The actors — playing not only the three Kafka aspects, but also K's parents and sister, Max Brod, and Felice Bauer — change costumes onstage, sometimes wearing masks, to move between Kafka's real and imaginary worlds. "The greatest challenge has been to create clear conventions onstage, to bring the audience along on this surreal ride," says director Kevin Bartlett.

What emerges from all this, real and surreal, is a portrait of the artist as a man with an impossible career. The play takes us over five years of Kafka's life and work, during which he wrote "The Metamorphosis" and embarked on his doomed affair with Felice. As K becomes more obsessed with writing, he concludes that his mind has no room for anything else, not even (someone else's idea of) love. "Who knows," K muses, "perhaps my parents are right. Perhaps in time, I will get married, and my interest in...in all this...will be reduced to the level appropriate for an educated man." But he is more sincere when he admits that "there is a tremendous world inside my head. But how to release it...without tearing myself apart!"

As a character, K is a bit like your brilliant teenage nephew who refuses to "apply himself," and, when he bothers, subtly reminds you that he's only doing you a favor. You loathe him in public, but you are nonetheless haunted by the unpleasant suspicion that he may be a better person than your own overly ambitious son. K's family, of course, only wants him to be happy, within a definition of happiness that consists mainly of succeeding in business and finding an appropriate wife. There is, it must be said, some discomfort for the Jewish theatergoer in the play's implication that these expectations are the Jewish aspect of Kafka's identity, rather than the social climbing of a family attempting to shed its Jewishness in order to be as European as possible.

But what the play misses here is made up for in its unique portrayal of an artist at work. While the Jewish theatergoer will not find the source of the dread in Kafka's fiction, he will find something larger, and with implications for the very possibility of Jewish art, or any art at all. The play's power comes from its inspired depiction of the sheer weirdness of an artist's life, in which imaginary characters seem more real than actual people — an experience to which most working artists can attest. But at the heart of this play is the premise, in its own way deeply Jewish, that the ultimate freedom of art is in fact profoundly selfish, requiring the total absorption of the individual away from the personal responsibilities that give life meaning. As K finally admits to Max Brod, "The only thing I am really good at is hurting the people closest to me."

The play's greatest triumph is that the audience comes out not particularly sympathetic to K. As the play progresses, our loyalty to K shifts away from him and toward the real people around him, who suffer from K's detachment. His affair with Felice is fascinatingly depicted in all of its destructiveness. The Narrative Voice performs K's love letters to seduce her on his behalf, but when it comes to meeting K himself, Felice realizes she's been bait-and-switched. As she scolds K, "I'm always second best to the playmates in your head." Toward the end, the parallel between K's impotence and European Jewish fate is made explicit: When Felice despairs of her "hope" that K will ever love her (or that either of them can live a normal life), a violin plays strains of "HaTikvah."

But those playmates in K's head seduce the theatergoer too, who is left wondering whether imaginative brilliance is worth the price of forfeiting real life. In America, where originality and individualism trump all else, the answer is usually yes. But for the Jewish reader or theatergoer, the answer is less clear. And one wonders, leaving the theater, whether that precise clash of values, and its horrifying outcome, might be what Kafka really saw, and dreaded.

Dara Horn is the author of the novel "The World to Come" (W.W. Norton), now in paperback.