

The Banality of Evil

By Jack Helbig

Metamorphosis

Lookingglass Theatre Company

at the Ruth Page Center

In the Penal Colony

Court Theatre

By Jack Helbig

Back when I was in high school, Franz Kafka was one of those writers, along with Hermann Hesse, Albert Camus, and a handful of others, whose prose style was so deceptively simple it was used to introduce young readers to great literature. We dutifully read "Metamorphosis," Siddhartha, and The Stranger (or pretended to), and those of us who knew how to play the game learned to parrot the teacher well enough to sound like we understood them. We might have learned the right buzzwords--angst, alienation, despair--which would come in handy when it was time to impress college recruiters. But to most of us "Metamorphosis" was just a not particularly scary or exciting early-20th-century science fiction fable. It didn't seem to matter that the hero, a guy named Gregor Samsa, just happened to awake one morning to find he'd been mysteriously transformed into a gigantic insect.

Playwrights and theater groups must be drawn to Kafka for the same reason that high school teachers are--he looks simple and his prose, even in translation, is crisp and spare. For all the tragedy in his tales, the writer remains serene, almost comic. With their fantastic settings and beleaguered protagonists, Kafka's stories would appear to be tailor-made for the theater. Which may explain why two of the city's better theater companies have independently decided to stage two of Kafka's better-known works--and why each production disappoints, despite brilliant staging, terrific acting, and, in one case, a score by a major composer.

As a writer of fables, Kafka isn't interested in characters. And though his situations can be symbolic, the prose that describes them is realistic. At times he intentionally writes with the studied opacity of a bureaucrat's report, creating a hard, literal shell beneath which he layers irony on irony, second and third meanings that sometimes only indirectly relate to the story. His prose was meant to be read, not spoken aloud, and not interpreted by actors, singers, or acrobats.

Using Steven Berkoff's eccentric but serviceable adaptation of Kafka's "Metamorphosis," director David Catlin fills the production with amazing stage pictures. Some are surreal, in a mildly Magritte-like way, as when Gregor Samsa's boss shows up at his home wearing shoes that add another foot and a half to his height. And as Gregor Samsa, Lawrence E. DiStasi is nothing short of astonishing. His athletic performance is a perfect marriage of Stanislavsky-style naturalism with graceful, energetic acrobatics. With not an ounce of special-effects makeup, DiStasi looks, acts, and moves like a man who has been turned into a gigantic beetle. He's helped by Geoff Curley's amazing set, which gives DiStasi many opportunities to scurry up a wall or across a ceiling (a trick he must have learned from his wife, Sylvia Hernandez, a veteran circus performer and one of the teachers at the Actor's Gymnasium, the school of circus arts DiStasi runs in Evanston). When Berkoff's adaptation calls for DiStasi to drop the acrobatics to be onstage, front and center, playing Gregor Samsa, the good son working himself to an early grave to pay his family's debts, DiStasi speaks his lines with power and

conviction.

He's not alone in delivering a fine performance. Heidi Stillman is moving as Gregor Samsa's perhaps overly devoted sister, Greta. Everything she says has a subtle sexual undercurrent, which seems fitting in a family as neurotic as the Samsas. Andrew White, as usual, turns in a pitch-perfect performance, playing Gregor's manipulative, passive-aggressive father--a man who is, like Kafka's own father, bullying and overbearing one minute, weak and easily offended the next.

Still, in the end, Catlin's production is not satisfying. Sections of it move much too slowly. And even though Berkoff's adaptation takes special pains to indict capitalism and Gregor's grossly dysfunctional family for his transformation into an insect, this show works against anything but a superficial understanding of the text. DiStasi tries so hard to embody a man trapped in a beetle's body, it becomes easy to forget that for Kafka the beetle was just a symbol.

A similar problem plagues the Philip Glass-JoAnne Akalaitis production of Kafka's "In the Penal Colony." Only this time it isn't the performances that stand between us and Kafka's text--it's Glass's trademark music and all the hype that inevitably arises when a famous composer is professionally reunited with his famous ex-wife. You could tell opening night was a special event. People walked about the Court Theatre lobby even more stiffly than usual, and more than a few of the men showed up in tuxedos. This was an opera, after all, and Glass is certainly a great man, even if to my untrained ears it sounds like he's been writing the same tune for the last 30 years.

The air started to go out of the evening once the lights came up onstage. Despite being a little less than half the length of "Metamorphosis," "In the Penal Colony" is, in some respects, an even more difficult work to parse.

In telling his story about a traveler who discovers just how cruel a colonial government can become, Kafka adopts an oblique, detached, and somewhat clueless persona. Much of "In the Penal Colony" reads like a dry report written by a not very imaginative government functionary who doesn't entirely understand what he's reporting on. At the center of the tale is a beastly implement of torture, a device for executing criminals by repeatedly writing the law they broke on their bodies. The process takes about 12 hours; then the corpses are unceremoniously dumped into a pit.

As with "Metamorphosis," the tale can be read as a horror story. Its climax--the officer who delights in using the device is killed by it--seems a lot like all those stories of mad inventors killed by their own creations. But simply as horror, the tale is a letdown. Kafka's narrator conveys the horror in a way that makes it routine and banal, as tiresome as Gregor's daily commute, which is Kafka's point--or one of them.

Unfortunately, Glass and Akalaitis have decided to heighten the most sedentary elements in Kafka's story. The two leads, John Duykers and Eugene Perry (who alternates performances with his twin brother, Herbert Perry), may have clear, strong, beautiful voices, but Glass's music and Rudolph Wurlitzer's libretto are extremely undramatic. What could be less interesting than watching two men onstage discussing what they are doing or what has happened in the past?

Wurlitzer occasionally breaks up the singing with selections from Kafka's journals, spoken by a Kafka stand-in, Jose J. Gonzales. These selections are fascinating and seem to draw some parallels between the action onstage and Kafka's life. But soon enough the singing begins again, and though the show is only 90 minutes long it feels much longer, especially around the 45-minute mark, when I swear I saw a good dozen members of the finely dressed opening-night crowd nodding off in their seats.

Art accompanying story in printed newspaper (not available in this archive): photos/Chris Bennion/Michael Brosilow.

