

Kafka's Metamorphosis

By Steve Moulds

MTSU Theatre

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Critical Response by Skylar Grieco

I attended the preview performance of *Kafka's Metamorphosis* produced by Middle Tennessee State University Theatre on February 22nd. The adaptation of the classic novella was written by playwright Steve Mould and the production was directed by MTSU Theatre faculty member Halena Kays. The production was a world premiere and rather avant-garde in nature. The themes are similar to those present in Kafka's original novella including a focus on family life and depression. I was fortunate enough to see the performance twice, once at the first dress rehearsal and once on the "preview night." After viewing the first dress rehearsal I was not overly thrilled or impressed, however the work that happened between then and the preview provided a much more satisfying and thought-provoking experience. While the show is definitely not for everyone, I would argue that it was quite successful in telling Kafka's story. Kays crafted a highly conceptualized world for the story and characters to exist in. She was able to achieve this by working with strong collaborators in both design and performance.

Kafka's Metamorphosis, at its most basic level, is a story about a man who wakes up as a "gigantic insect." The novella was originally published in 1915. Now, over one hundred years later, MTSU chose to tackle this "insect." The absurd story follows Gregor Samsa, who suddenly wakes up transformed into a giant insect and the repercussions that has on his family. Gregor serves as a provider for his family, so this makes things a bit more than inconvenient. As his family deals with their new circumstances, they discover things about themselves that they may have otherwise never known.

Kays created a highly stylized world that was embraced through all areas of design and performance. The world was heightened and exaggerated to accentuate the absurd

qualities of the play. There was definitely a time period attributed to the production that was reminiscent of the early 1900s, but it was the most exaggerated version of that era. The exaggerations evoked an unreal quality to the world that made it clear that we were not living in reality as we know it. The world was shaped through the actor's storytelling and exaggerated character choices, the enormous turntable set, the outrageous costumes, and the consistent underscoring sound design. From the moment the play began with the characters of Mind, Body, and Spirit walking through the audience and directly addressing us, it was clear that we were in a strange world. The opening sequence aggressively pulled the audience into the world through a flurry of motion and engaging sound design created by John Gill. Kays continued to immerse the audience in this world through a consistent soundscape and bold characters.

The end of the play was particularly powerful. We witnessed the family embracing their new lives and stepping off of this platform that they have felt confined to. As they crossed downstage, the projection/video design exploded back into its initial position, the lights drastically shifted focus, and the characters embraced a part of the world that we had not witnessed yet. It was a distinctly different moment from what we had been experiencing, which strengthened the finality of the moment. Up until this point, we had watched a family struggle to navigate their circumstances and this world, but now we finally witnessed them living comfortably for just a brief instant. As sad as the end of the play is, it was also hopeful and invigorating for these three family members.

As mentioned previously, the show was highly conceptualized in all areas. This included elements such as a 20' revolve, a live Foley artist, bizarre costumes, and full stage

rear video projection that ran the entire length of the show. It was clear that the designers were embracing the absurd qualities of the show as much as they could. Unfortunately, I don't particularly feel that all the design elements served the production and concept in ways that they should have. Scott Boyd's scenic design was impressive and grandiose, which feels consistent with the things previously stated. However, it didn't feel grand and exaggerated in the same way that the show itself is. It felt disjointed from the concept.

While I was in awe of the spectacle, I couldn't help but feel like some of this grand spectacle was usurping the power of the text. The script is based on a famous work of literature and is quite narrative in nature. Therefore, I believe that the words are the most important piece of the show. Unfortunately, the emphasis was not always on the text when it should be because there was this great spectacle to focus on. The scenic design did not always serve the production by effectively drawing my focus as an audience member towards the correct moments. The lighting design, by student Ron Collins, did a great job of compensating some of those focus issues, but ultimately could only do so much. The element that I felt best embraced the concept and served the production was Tommy Macon's costume design.

Macon's design was highly stylized, making use of eccentric patterns and clothing that evoked the era, without feeling specifically period. The strongest choice was made by separating the family from the ensemble members through a distinctly different color palette and pattern choices. The ensemble members were dressed in assorted plaids from head to toe, while the Samsa family was dressed in bright colorful clothing that felt drastically different from the "rest of the world." This difference allowed the family to stand out as "real" people against the revolving door of outrageous characters. I found this to be

particularly effective as it was done in the opposite direction of what I would have expected, but it was all the more effective for that reason. I would have anticipated them being dressed “normally” and “simpler” to further ground them, but Macon’s choice to put them in bright swirling colors helped them stand out much more than they ever would have if the former choice had been made.

The piece of Macon’s design that faltered for me was the interpretation of Mind, Body, and Spirit. The three parts of Gregor’s whole, portrayed by Blake Holliday, Lakryslin Williams, and Jayd-Lynn Graves respectively, were all dressed identically in plaid suits from head to toe. While this clearly articulated that they were united as three bodies in one, it didn’t help to highlight the differences between their parts. The script creates three distinctly different voices for each character, but the costumes didn’t exemplify these differences. I had this desire for them to be similar, but with distinct differences. I believe the choice could have been more effective if they were all dressed in the same pattern with slightly different styles or vice-versa. Gregor, portrayed wonderfully by student Joshua Jackson, was dressed with the same pattern, but lacked a jacket. This difference was just enough to maintain him as a different entity and I feel it would have been effective to use a similar strategy with the parts of his whole as well.

The strongest element of the show was definitively the acting. It was exceedingly clear that Kays had communicated the world brilliantly to her actors and that they embraced it through every choice they made. The ensemble characters all created engaging and different movement, voices, and styles for each of their many roles, including an impressively overweight bank manager played by Delaney Keith, an over-eager young

apprentice played by Moira Vaughn, a jaded cleaning woman played by Robbie Ramirez, and an obnoxious boarder played by Elvis Karegeya. Each of the ensemble members seamlessly and effortlessly shifted between their many characters with clear distinction and attention to style in each of them. The Samsa family was also quite distinct and consistent in their choices. Johnathan Carter's portrayal of Mr. Samsa was particularly impressive. I found myself always engaged in his voice and movement. He carried himself with strength and pride, while speaking firmly. Every time Carter had lines, his voice commanded your attention in such a way that you would never doubt the authority of this father figure. Carter shined particularly in a scene where he arrives home from work to find Gregor out of his room and he begins to attack him with apples. Carter's assault felt dangerous and volatile in all the right ways. He never faltered throughout the entire piece. His performance was rivaled only by that of Joshua Jackson who played the main character, Gregor Samsa.

Jackson's performance as Gregor was simply incredible. The character was onstage for the entire show, even from before the show begins actually, and yet Jackson never missed a beat. He spent a great deal of time onstage with no lines. He was left with only the power of movement to tell his story. This is what made Jackson's performance so impressive. He had incredible control of his body and was able to manipulate himself into an increasingly impressive bug-like movement. The first moment we see Gregor, he is waking up to find himself transformed. Over the course of the play, Gregor gains stronger control of his limbs. Jackson mastered this evolution and we were able to watch as he "learned" how to control his new bug body. The moments where Jackson's physicality particularly stood out were the moments that Gregor stared longingly out a window.

Jackson maneuvered a chair into position, without the use of his arms, and hoisted himself up to view the world in a manner that could only be described as methodical. It was incredible to watch this character discover how to use his limbs to his advantage, and Jackson took us on that journey with him. As Gregor began to debilitate towards the end of the show, Jackson became less agile and ferocious in his movement. It would have been entirely possible to follow the emotion and journey of this character without text, just by following Jackson's controlled movement. I've never been quite so impressed by the ability to tell a story without words.

Ultimately, I am not a fan of the novella *The Metamorphosis* by Franz Kafka. I read it in high school and was bored and unimpressed. However, MTSU's production of *Kafka's Metamorphosis* allowed me to enjoy this story that I once despised. Moulds' adaptation and Kays' direction created a world for this story to exist in a way that was innovative and engaging. While I do feel that some of the design elements were disjointed, overall I felt that they embraced Kays' concept, and strived to enhance the story to the best of their ability. The actors stood out as the strongest pieces of the puzzle, which I would argue is the most important piece of the story we tell as artists. I would absolutely consider this production a success and believe that all those involved should be very proud of their accomplishment.