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Love's Tortures

A play about Kafka explores the highs and lows of the writer's first love affair.

Ted Merwin - Special To The Jewish Week

"There are times, dearest, when I am convinced that I am unfit for any human relationship," wrote the tormented Jewish writer Franz Kafka to the first love of his life, Felice Bauer, on Feb. 8, 1913. His insight contained a great deal of truth. According to Christine Simpson, whose new play, "The Great Conjuror," is based loosely on Kafka's "Letters to Felice," Kafka was only at peace with himself when he was writing. He was afflicted with a social anxiety so severe that, ironically, as Simpson told *The Jewish Week*, "Speech robbed him of the power of communication."



"The Great Conjuror," directed by Kevin Bartlett, also incorporates material from Kafka's novella "The Metamorphosis" and from his voluminous diaries. The playwright, a Korean-American from Long Island, was raised by what she calls an "Irish-German-Catholic" family. When she was studying in a masters program in literature at Washington University in St. Louis, a friend's father who taught German at another university gave her a copy of the "Letters to Felice," penned by the Prague-based writer between 1912 and 1917 to his beloved in Berlin.

After moving back to New York, Simpson gravitated to the theater, where she played various roles with the National Asian Theater Company and other groups. But she found few substantial roles available for Asian women and decided to try her hand writing plays and films. "Letters to Felice" is her first play. The multi-ethnic cast includes Michael Jerome Johnson, Roseanne Medina, Tzahi Moskovitz, Brian Nishii, Kelly Paredes, Andy Place, Sara Thigpen and Paula Wilson.

Franz and Felice were engaged twice to be married; both times the engagement was broken off. Ultimately, Kafka ended up in other relationships, including one with Dora Diamant, a kindergarten teacher and daughter of Orthodox Jewish parents.

Kafka's epistolary romance with Felice both elated and depressed him; he was convinced that it exacerbated his various physical and emotional ailments, which included migraines, insomnia, constipation and boils. Around the time that their relationship ended, he also developed tuberculosis, which led to his death seven years later. Nevertheless, he escaped a worse fate: His three sisters were killed by the Nazis.

Many scholars see Kafka's neuroses and physical problems as rooted in the deep conflict between his art and the expectations of his bourgeois parents, especially his tyrannical father, to whom he wrote an even more famous epistle, "Letter to My Father," in 1919.

Fluid Motion Theater and Film, the production company behind "The Great Conjuror," commissions multi-ethnic adaptations of classic myths and texts from around the globe. Among its other upcoming projects are a play by a Julliard pianist based on Modest Mussorgsky's "Pictures at an Exhibition," a poetry slam version of Euripides' "Medea" and "The Midas Project," about the choice between love and money in modern-day New York. n

"The Great Conjuror" runs through Nov. 4 at the Kirk Theater, 410 W. 42nd St. Performances are Tuesday through Saturday evenings at 8 p.m, with Saturday matinees at 3 p.m. For tickets, \$18, call Ticket Central at (212) 279-4200.

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