

The Great Conjuror



Pictured: Brian Nishii, Paula Wilson, Kelly Paredes, and Tzahi Moskovitz (back to camera) in a scene from *The Great Conjuror* (photo © John Ko)

nytheatre.com review

Martin Denton · October 28, 2006

The Great Conjuror of Christine Simpson's unusual, evocative new play is specifically Franz Kafka, but the brilliance of this piece is that it could just as well be any of us.

Whether we write stark tales of men transformed into giant insects, or act the part of such a writer on stage, or, for that matter, write reviews of plays about that writer, we've all gone through the trials that the protagonist of Simpson's drama goes through. The conjuration isn't just art, it's life: how is anybody supposed to create anything when so many trivialities and details and obstacles stand in the way?

Simpson's play imagines the young [Kafka](#) composing his masterpiece *The Metamorphosis* while bombarded with duties related to his family and his alienating job. Life imitates art, as the misunderstood Franz copes (poorly) with a father who thinks his writing is frivolous, a mother who longs only for grandchildren, and a sister who's supportive without making much of a commitment one way or the other. His friend Max, a literary editor, helps him get some of his work published, but that only leads to doubt: is Max publishing the stories because they're good, or because he likes Franz?

The second half of the play introduces further complications in the form of Felice, a young woman whom Franz meets through Max and with whom he falls in love (she's described in the program as "the love of a lifetime"). Can Franz make everybody happy by marrying this smart, kind-hearted, capable woman? Will he lose part of himself if he does? I was reminded of a line from Sondheim & Lapine's *Sunday in the Park with George*: "Louis will be a loving and attentive father. I cannot because I cannot look up from my pad." The pain of the sacrifice—either to make the art you know you were born to make; or, to NOT make it—is the palpable heart of Simpson's play.

Tzahi Moskovitz inhabits the role of Kafka with such sure conviction that the moments of decision are almost brutal to witness. And so is the impotence of the real people around Franz, especially poor Felice, played by Sara Thigpen with a simplicity and straightforwardness that's achingly anathema to Kafka.

Simpson's conceit with regard to "real people," by the way, is fascinating. Max, Felice, and (sometimes) Franz's sister are portrayed naturalistically, so we experience them with the humanity that Franz feels for them. His parents—here identified only as "F" and "M"—are portrayed by actors wearing masks, as if the faces they show their son are always illusory, always false.

Simpson also provides a pair of alter egos for her main character in the form of a narrator ("N," played with great warmth by Paula Wilson) and a "creative force" ("G," seen first as Gregor Samsa and later as an aspect of Kafka himself, performed forcefully by Brian Nishii). This device makes for some really arresting stagecraft, as when Felice plays her first "love scene" not with Franz but with "N," here serving as another kind of mask, depicting another kind of illusion. Unfortunately, "N" is absent from most of the

CAST

Michael Jerome Johnson, Roseanne Medina, Tzahi Moskovitz, Brian Nishii, Kelly Paredes, Andy Place, Sara Thigpen, Paula Wilson

AUTHOR

Christine Simpson

DIRECTOR

Kevin Bartlett

SETS

Kevin Bartlett

LIGHTING

Caroline Abella

COSTUMES

Deborah J. Caney

CHOREOGRAPHER

Wendy Seyb

MUSIC DIRECTOR

Benjamin Ickies

STAGE MANAGER

Corinne Neal

MASKS

Melissa Crawford

PRODUCING COMPANY

Fluid Motion Theater & Film

second half of the play, which is a bit confusing; overall, the use of these characters is tantalizing but a bit inconsistent.

But it's absolutely indicative of the imaginative and risk-taking vision of this young, talented writer; Simpson has certainly earned a place on my list of playwrights to keep an eye on. She's well-served here by director Kevin Bartlett, who has fashioned a suitably abstract environment in which to stage *The Great Conjuror* and keeps the play moving fluidly and cinematically through an almost too-short running time of an hour and a quarter. The other design elements—costumes by Deborah J. Caney, lighting by Caroline Abella, masks by Melissa Crawford—are effective, but none so much as the evocative music which is not credited in the program but played live by a three-piece orchestra led by Benjamin Ickies.

It all makes for a feast for the mind and spirit, a cerebral and surprisingly uplifting celebration of the creative impulse and all the enemies in mundane experience over which it must triumph. Simpson has chosen her subject well in *The Great Conjuror*, and I certainly left the theatre with new appreciation of the man behind the giant insect; but even more than that, with unexpected empathy and identification as well.