

NEW THEATER CORPS

AN INSIGHTFUL LOOK AT WHAT'S HAPPENING ON THE NEW YORK STAGE

THEATER TALK has enlisted a group of up-and-coming, young theater professionals to see and review some of the latest stage productions in the NY Tri-State area.

We hope the comments they post on this blog will be useful.

SUNDAY, OCTOBER 22, 2006

The Great Conjurer

Kafka awoke one day to find himself in a play . . . *The Great Conjurer* is about the greatest magic trick of all--turning a blank page into story--and the toll that boundless creativity has on a bounded man.

Reviewed by Aaron Riccio



Writers make for good characters: they're tortured, twisted, and vicariously fragmented people. Christine Simpson's new play, *The Great Conjurer* takes one of our most irregular writers, Franz Kafka, and shows, under the expert, smooth direction of Kevin Bartlett, how to enhance a traditional play with the use of classic and contemporary flair. For example, masks are used to make Kafka's family, S, M, and F (sister, mother, and

father) seem like the fictions, and stylized movements (choreographed by Wendy Seyb) give life to the internal struggle between a man's art and a man's love. As for Kafka, he is split into three characters: K, the man; N, the narrator (who cites from Kafka's fictions and letters); and G, the creative

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â€œbugâ€œ or Mr. Samsa himselfâ€œ sent to physically pull K away from the real world. Set loose simultaneously, they overlap one another, building momentum in a surge of creativity until K is no more than an amanuensis for his crazed thoughts.

In this, *The Great Conjuror* brings to mind both the anguished writers of Chekhovâ€™s *The Seagull* and Shakespeareâ€™s conflicted *Hamlet*. K is a man of constant soliloquies, and at one point, when pondering how to release the worlds within him without tearing himself apart, goes so far as to say â€œThat is the question.â€œ The show is also littered with great lines (beyond the excerpted ones): â€œThere is never enough time for endless hesitation.â€œ The only ambiguous choice is the use of classical music to underscore the work. The music is quaint and sobering: it goes too far. It also causes some confusion to the directorâ€™s otherwise-brilliant set design: if the foreground is the real world and the background is the imaginary one (a solitary tree and a blackboard sit behind three transparent scrims), what do the musicians (who sit at the top of a staircase in the furthest recesses of the stage) represent?

Thankfully, the main characters are engaging enough to keep questions like this at bay, and at just over an hour, the show zips along too quickly to be distracting. Characters crash over one another like a multi-car pileup: you canâ€™t not watch. Brian Nishii (G) is the most engaging (with his flailing limbs and bug-like squats), but theyâ€™re all talented: Paula Wilson (N) speaks with eloquence and understanding, using Kafkaâ€™s words to seduce the world around her, and Tzahi Moskovitz (K), illustrates the internal struggle to break back to reality, but also demonstrates a childlike delight in his own fantasies. However, itâ€™s Sara Thigpen (Felice, Kafkaâ€™s love) who steals the show (at the cost of having her heart broken night after night after night). Whereas Kafkaâ€™s family comes across as a Greek chorus in reverse (keep in mind, their role is to destroy the narrative, not to foster it), Felice is the emotional center of the show, twice-engaged to Kafka, but, because of Kafkaâ€™s insecurities and obsessions, never married. That she doesnâ€™t go mad after five years and 1,500 letters is a miracle.

The Great Conjuror is a thought-provoking display of the creative process. Though it is just a brief glimpse, one that is at times more performance piece than play, this little drama packs a lot into one hour. If youâ€™re at all interested in the arts, this is a must-see: there is no greater struggle than that of an artist with his art.

Kirk Theater (410 W. 42nd Street)

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Songs of the Dragons Flying to Heaven

FRINGE 2006 (Encore): *Perfect Harmony*



Tickets (212-279-4200): \$18.00

Schedule (to 11/4): Tuesday-Sunday @ 8:00; Saturday @ 3:00

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