

From Our Archives

METAMORPHOSIS

By Franz Kafka. Ethel Barrymore Theatre, New York. 15 April 1989

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Left to right: Laura Esterman, Madeleine Potter, Mikhail Baryshnikov, Rene Auberjonois, Mitch Kreindel in a scene from Kafka's "Metamorphosis," adapted and directed by Steven Berkoff, at the Ethel Barrymore Theatre. Photo by Martha Swope.

“Sometimes I feel I understand the Fall of Man better than anyone,” Franz Kafka once said. In his theatrical adaptation of *Metamorphosis*, director Steven Berkoff continues the Kafkaesque exploration of man’s moral condition, believing that though dangerous, it is as necessary now as it ever was. The whole art of Kafka persists in forcing us to reread him. If he ever suggests any explanations, they are not revealed in clear language, thus they require that the work be reread from another point of view. Berkoff’s *Metamorphosis* proves a point in doing this, if only in order to gain the courage for taking another look at, as Kafka puts it, “the horror of life - the terror of art.”

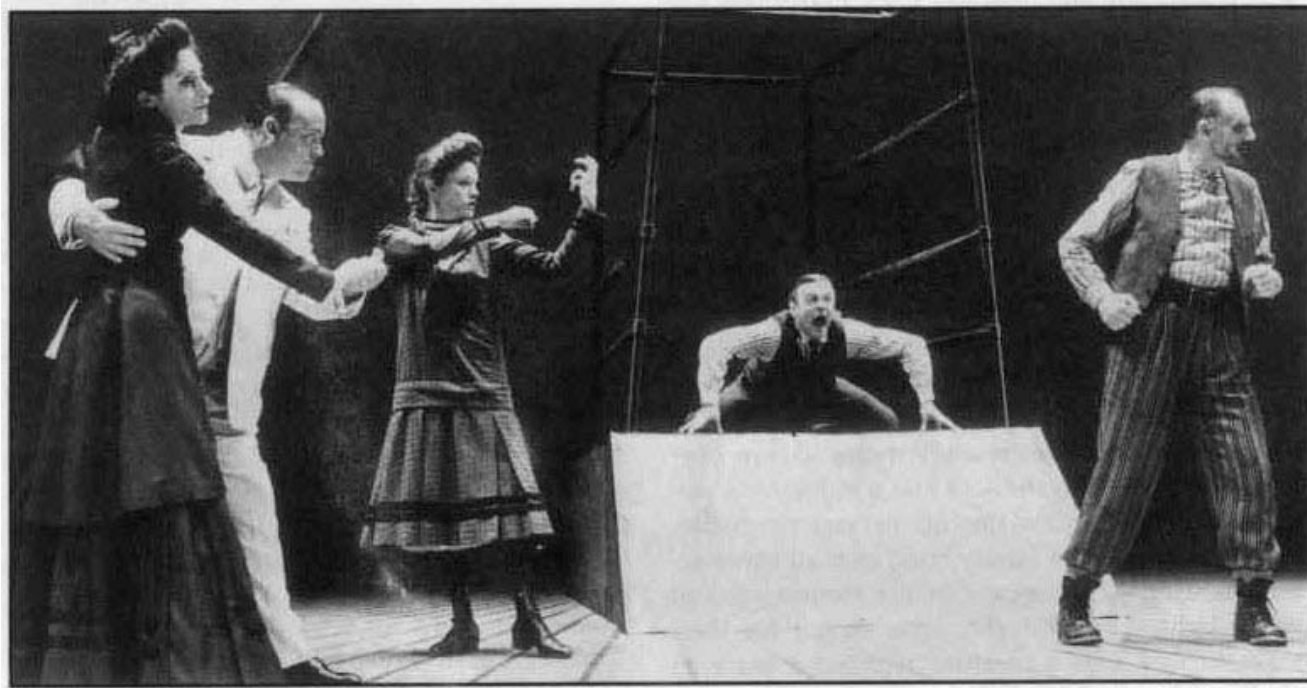
On the stage, Berkoff created the atmosphere of uncertainty and insecurity. It was as oppressive as that of those unaired rooms in which so many of Kafka’s stories were enacted. The Samsa family home was nothing but grey airless space; the world had become too heavy with spiritual emptiness. One felt like pushing one’s head against the wall of a cell without doors or windows. Gregor’s room was composed of black metal bars, and the members of his family communicated through the “walls” of his room, as if Gregor were not there.

Employing farce and pantomime, Berkoff choreographed his actors in highly stylized gestures that resembled marionettes. They performed ensemble balletic moves to the tinkly and percussive music of Larry Spivack, which underlined the emotional colors. There was no insect costume for Baryshnikov - Gregor. The dancer proved to be a splendid actor: he used his whole body - his fingers, his hands, his arms, his legs to create a frightening, yet heartbreaking insect.

It was not just a nightmare, but a farce as well: a fusion of tragedy and humor. We saw a comedy of intense movement, horizontal and vertical, of running and climbing. Scurrying across the floor on his elbows and knees, hanging upside down on the bars of his cage like room, desperately trying to turn over from his back-Baryshnikov was a monstrous vermin, an unclean animal unsuited even for sacrifice. “G-0-0-0-D!!!” the family cried out; all three actors dancing like puppets in the three circles of white light. Their Gregor, who slaved for their sake, turned into a creature without a Place in God’s order. Berkoff and Baryshnikov were able to convey Kafka’s essential vision of an artist as an exile from reality, as a weird non-being condemned to irreparable estrangement.

Baryshnikov’s stunning performance possessed the Kafka’s fusion of the surreal and the real. He forced us to remember that secret complicity, which joins the logical and the everyday to the tragic. The antennae grew out of Gregor, his spine arched out, but the only thing that disturbed him was his boss’s reaction to his absence. He regarded the metamorphosis as a mere occupational injury, an ordinary misfortune.

The most gruesome and absurd aspect of Gregor’s fate was not the metamorphosis itself but the blindness with which everybody treated it. The Chief Clerk, Father, Mother, and Sister surrounded Gregor’s room. They behaved as if the metamorphosis were a natural event, some dirty trick on Gregor’s part; while Gregor desperately tried to believe that it had not happened at all. The actors conveyed an impression of nightmarish comedy, and even more disturbingly, of nightmarish truth. And the truth was that Gregor had become



Left to right: Laura Esterman, T. J. Meyers, Madeleine Potter, Mikhail Baryshnikov, Rene Auberjonois in a scene from Kafka's "Metamorphosis," adapted and directed by Steven Berkoff, at the Ethel Barrymore Theatre. Photo by Martha Swope.

void and nonexistent, not only in the world of business, but also in the world of the family. This terrible truth was also the realization that even the most beautiful and most tender relations between people were founded on illusions. The theme of communication emerged as the central idea of Berkoff's *Metamorphosis*.

The totality of alienation was stressed through the theatre of shadows. Whenever family members were trying to talk to Gregor, their huge shadows interacted on the back wall as if amplifying mutual misunderstanding. No one knew or suspected what he himself was, or what the other person was.

Gregor's parents never had any idea of either his internal conflicts or of the sacrifices he had made for their sake.

In Berkoff's play, their greed and stupidity were the forces that actually concealed, distorted, and destroyed what was essential in human nature. When the distortion finally assumed a visible form, they were at a loss. Mother (Laura Esterman) explained: "There was always something strange about Gregor. That's why he's left us." Even the Sister (Madeleine Potter) did not appear as loving and compassionate as she was in the novel. In the play she took care of Gregor only because she was literally pushed to do so by her parents.

The director made the Sarnsa family behave more animalistically than Gregor. The pantomime of a family dinner was a repulsive scene. In the episode where the Sister was performing on the violin, Gregor was the only one capable of understanding and appreciating music. "I am not an animal!!!" he cried out. The symmetrical movements of the Samsa family, the Chief Clerk, and the Lodger suggested not only the mechanical movements of puppets, but also the insect-like synchronization. Berkoff wanted to convey one of the most stubborn Kafka motifs: the sameness of things. Individualization had truly become a burden in this world. Natural and moral order disappeared.

The main idea of Metamorphosis for Berkoff was the distortion of one's self through falsehood and deception. Gregor's father was never as weak as he pretended to be. The actor, Rene Auberjonois, demonstrated how the bank-messenger's uniform covered up his character's insect-like, parasitic existence. The Father also possessed more money than Gregor knew about. Gregor's sacrifice was meaningless. For Kafka and Berkoff, Gregor's insect shape conveyed a disgust with oneself and with the material forces that compel him to carry on a life that had become questionable in itself.

At the end of the play, hysterical and preposterous Mrs. Samsa resembled the Mother from The Castle, who believed that a man should not be allowed to perish. Berkoff made her express the final intent of her son's metamorphosis as the escape into freedom: "Be free, my Gregor! Free!"

There was no moral closure. The play ended with the stark question of the self and society, individual and family. The absurd was recognized, accepted, and we seemed to be resigned to it. But from then on we knew that it ceased to be the absurd.

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