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“The Trial”

It is, of course, no easy matter to stage a play which does not exist. And we should, I feel, be quick to acknowledge that in presenting a dramatization of Franz Kafka's novel "The Trial" Ormond and Women's undertook a very ambitious task. There were several crucial things which had to be accomplished before the more routine aspects of production could get under way; a suitable script itself had to be drafted, sets had to be designed and incidental music composed. David Niven, the producer, himself undertook the first and most formidable task of adapting the novel to the stage, and that this was a real accomplishment is undeniable. There were, of course, some features of this play that I felt were unsatisfactory. This is no doubt inevitable; where a straight adaptation is concerned rather than a new artistic creation we are apt to feel that we ourselves would have done so and so differently. Further it is often difficult to tell whether the cause of our dissatisfaction lies in the actual production or in the play itself, but as production and scripting were in the same hands this point is perhaps not important. It was, I feel, unsatisfactory that Joseph K. should emerge in the play as the really dominant figure; in the novel and in the film adaptation Joseph K. is still the central concern, but the rôle of the Advocate is a far weightier one. The accent on K. meant also that while the sense of the puppet was felt quite clearly, the diffused depersonalized sense of a manipulator, so forceful in the novel, was not. However, this is after all merely a quibble of personal interpretation and perhaps not a valid criticism to make. Yet throughout the adaptation there occurred minor features which one could not help but compare in an unfavourable light with the effects achieved in the novel. One such incident occurred in the first scene. Frau Grubach entered, crept hesitantly up two of the steps towards Joseph K.'s room, saw K., turned and left quickly as K. called "Come in, do". This incident was rather meaningless; at best it was a very poor substitute for the following passage of the novel:

"He saw her only for an instant, for no sooner did she recognize him than she was obviously overcome by embarrassment, apologized for intruding, vanished, and shut the door again with the utmost care. 'Come in, do', he would just have had time to say."

This might seem to be a trivial point to make but it highlights a much larger issue. I question whether it is possible to adapt "The Trial" successfully for stage if one is to follow reasonably rigidly the form of the novel. The novel is after all so dependent for its impact on Kafka's prose style. Indeed the impulse of the novel, the almost relentless yet untraceable shift into frustration, derives mainly from the prose itself—a prose which pads along unobtrusively yet vividly. The effect of this can only be presented with great difficulty on stage (one is tempted to say it cannot be at all). A film can capture the effect—as Orson Welles's fine adaptation has shown—but I feel that Kafka's strangely static drama is beyond the resources of the stage. Having said that it can't be done, and that it wasn't satisfactorily done, let me praise David Niven for trying; his effort was by no means a failure—indeed at times his version was brilliant. If it was a failure as a great play it was a glorious failure, and it was certainly a success within the concept of student theatre.

The sets were the work of Elijah Moshinsky, and they displayed an imaginative conception and a meticulous realization. Essentially simple and striking they themselves represented a worthwhile experience in theatre. However sets alone, though they can mar, cannot make a play. The sets for this play laboured under two difficulties. In the first place, imaginative though they were, they were not able to communicate to us the intense sense of spiritual constriction and isolation which we find expressed through visual detail in the novel. In the play there was not, as in the novel, the vast overwhelming density of the Interrogation Chamber, nor, as in the film, was K. in his society lost in a maze of remorselessly tapping typewriters. It might

well be said that I am asking the theatrically impossible; perhaps so. The other burden that the sets laboured under was an essentially practical one and was I feel one of the few serious faults of the production—namely, there was not sufficient lighting for them to be effective. Of course the play is a dark one, and Kafka's vision is a dark one, but it was a pity that some of the effect of the sets (and incidentally of the action) should be inhibited in this way.

John Brock had the extremely difficult task of playing the rôle of Joseph K. His performance was a consistent one, and in general a sensitive one. In one way it was too consistent a performance; I felt there was not sufficient change in K. from the beginning of the play to the end, very largely because he was far too agitated and distressed from the outset. In addition, he resorted too often to gestures and exclamations of frustration, expressions which acquired a certain sameness so that as the play progressed one felt a stock response was being evoked in K. and not a living reaction to a given situation. This is not to suggest that Brock's performance was flat or uninspiring. Joseph K. he was, although not everybody's Joseph K., and certainly not Everyman as the producer's note suggested.

That Joseph K. dominated the play at the expense of the Advocate was, I feel, a fault of the form of the play and of the production and not of John McCaughey the Advocate. His part and that of the Examining

Magistrate (John Wregg) were well played within the terms of this drama.

One cannot comment on all of the actors in turn; in general it can be said that (with a few notable exceptions) the more important parts were well acted but not always satisfactorily portrayed. To take just one example, I could not see why Frau Grubach, who, granted, is a gossipy old woman, but nevertheless is a genuinely concerned person, should be played as a malicious Gossip with a sadistic sense of humour. Surely it is important that though well-meaning she equally is merely part of the labyrinth which K. is lost. The crowd scenes too emerged as a somewhat disconcerting dribble of characters across the stage; no doubt they carried some meaning but one was inhibited from discovering this by reason of being impressed by their stylized and vaguely ludicrous nature.

It would be very interesting to know what impact the play would have had if it had been an original work of art and not an adaptation. I suspect one would have found the plot very confusing indeed. It would however have expressed an artistic vision. The difficulty which this play laboured under was that it was supposed to be (in stage form) Franz Kafka's "The Trial". This is not to say that it was not a worthwhile experience. "The Trial" was an ambitious attempt, and the sort of attempt which it is surely the object of student theatre to make. It was perhaps a successful experiment but not a success.

—C. J. STEWARDSON