Kafka and the Theater

Introduction

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"Kafka and the Theater"—this conjunction does not refer to an easy alliance, let alone a kinship or similarity in purpose. At best, Kafka and the theater have had a history of contest, most visibly registered in the seemingly unending failures of theatrical Kafka adaptations and also perhaps in their few successes. It may be tempting to attribute these failures to the obvious truism that Kafka did not write for the theater and that his texts therefore had to be dragged onto the stage against their and his will. However, if it were simply a matter of using narrative texts in theatrical performances, our contemporary theater would not experience the difficulties it has had with Kafka. We live, after all, in a moment of theater history that has long left the norm of the dramatic text behind and feels free to use any text as one of many equal elements in the theater. The most successful directors, such as Robert Wilson, JoAnne Akalaitis, and Mary Zimmerman, frequently deploy everything from notebooks to novels—Kafka’s two master genres—for their most compelling productions. Kafka’s texts, even when used by the same directors, seem to pose more intractable resistance to the theater than texts that regard the theater with nothing but indifference and that therefore can be more easily adapted to it. There must be other reasons, then, why Kafka poses so much resistance to the theater, and also why the theater nevertheless always returns to him despite or because of this resistance.

This issue of The Germanic Review begins with essays that consider Kafka’s oeuvre in the context of his contemporary theater, analyzing why his texts would be invested in the theater even as they pose so many difficulties for their adapters. Kafka’s odd interest in the theater has been known for quite some time and has informed some of the best writing on him, from Evelyn Torton Beck’s magisterial study of Kafka’s fascination with the Yiddish theater (1971) to Joseph Vogl’s analysis of Kafka’s choreography of scenes and gazes (1990). This issue seeks to further and to deepen their reflections.
Two reasons for the contested nature of Kafka’s relation to the theater come into focus through the essays collected here. Far from expressing indifference to the theater, Kafka’s texts present their own peculiar form of theatricality that is often and strategically at odds with the requirements of the actual theater, and they therefore interfere with the attempt to make them “work” on the stage, as the common idiom has it. At the same time, however, these texts do not so much imagine the theater as they decompose it, deriving their stylistic and representational techniques from an antitheatrical impulse.

Mark M. Anderson’s contribution, which discusses the represented theatricality of Josefine, die Sängerin oder das Volk der Mäuse in relation to a whole range of contemporary theatrical phenomena from the Yiddish theater all the way to the Dadaist Cabaret Voltaire, demonstrates the productiveness of discussing Kafka’s writing in an expanded theatrical context. My essay locates Kafka’s early dramatic fragments, his reflections on the theater, and his voluminous notes on theatrical production in a different theatrical context—a modernist literary antitheatricalism that ties his work to that of Stéphane Mallarmé, James Joyce, and Gertrude Stein and also to the antitheatrical tradition within the modernist theater itself. Both essays discuss Kafka’s texts in the contested field between literature and theater.

The second part of the issue leaves the actual theater behind and focuses on theatricality as a quality of and problem in Kafka’s writing. Wolf Kittler’s discussion locates a tension within The Trial between the theatricality of the public, official, and oral trial, which never quite gets under way, and the non- or antitheatricality of the pretrial investigation, which is secret, bureaucratic, and written. Situating this pretrial within the context of turn-of-the-century legal discourse, he shows that far from presenting a proto-fascist police state, many legal processes presented in The Trial actually derive from this established procedure of the pretrial, in which guilt and innocence, prosecution and judgment are bureaucratically mingled. Klaus Mładek’s contribution also engages the uneasy relation between law and theater, demonstrating how the presentation and reception of gestures is embedded in a discourse about physiognomy and guilt through which theatrical gestures mark and betray the accused as accused. The theater in Kafka thus turns out to be many things: the promise of a public and oral trial in which Josef K. could confront his accusers and hopefully prove his innocence, but also the more secretive theater of guilty and revealing gestures, a theater of early morning arrests and nightly executions.

The last two contributions of this collection return the discussion to the theater itself, addressing Kafka’s life on the contemporary stage first through Shawn-Marie Garrett’s essay on some recent Kafka adaptations and then through an interview with JoAnne Akalaitis, the director of the recent and highly acclaimed “pocket opera” version, with music by Philip Glass, of Kafka’s In the Penal Colony. What emerges from both contributions is the sense that the theater is at least as fascinated with the figure of Kafka himself as with his texts, responding more to the cultural fabrication of Kafka as the quintessential modernist than to
the theatricality of his oeuvre. Kafka the “difficult” and “modernist” poet, whose cultural capital derives from this modernist difficulty, is thus just one side of the equation and must be seen in conjunction with Kafka the endlessly circulated and highly theatricalized icon; Kafka is thus clothed in a costume that is no longer simply his but that has acquired the commodified brand name *Kafkaesque*.

In detailing the relation between Kafka and the theater, the essays assembled here also make a case for rethinking literary modernism more generally through its relation to the theater. It is a project that seems reasonable enough, but one that has been at least partially obscured by the disciplinary dichotomy between theater studies and literary studies. Kafka is a good demonstration of how these two disciplines overlap in places other than the dramatic text, that even contemporary theater derives much challenge from high literary modernism just as this literary modernism derived much challenge from its contemporary theater. Theater is not just a group of actors performing for an attending audience; it is a form of representation, a value, a mode of writing and perhaps of being. All these aspects intersect with literature in various ways, which this special issue seeks to bring to the fore.

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**NOTES**


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