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Theatre review

'Kafka Parables' shows that too many ideas are better than none

The plotless play starts as a wonderment of alienation but then slowly dissolves into manic incomprehension

BY RYAN NYBURG
PULSE EDITOR

The work of Czech author Franz Kafka, for better or worse, is some of the defining literature of the 20th century, defining themes of alienation and fragmentation like no other before or since. What social critics have often pinpointed as our society's central philosophical problems, our disassociation from one another and the loss of personal identity within the cacophony of modern life, were all encapsulated within Kafka's three novels and his many short stories and parables. Based on these works, the University Theatre's original production, "Kafka Parables," leaves the audience wondering whether it is expressing these problems in a meaningful way or just adding to the noise.

The play was devised in a similar manner to 2003's "This Ship of Fools." The actors attended a class in which a core work was selected and an original production was created from the material and independent research. Where "Fools" used Sebastian Brant's 1494 text of the same name, "Kafka Parables" mixes and matches the eponymous author's works into a diverse pastiche. "Fools" dealt with the absurd side of human interaction, and

"Kafka" deals with the tragic side.

The play is essentially plotless, throwing stock characters into Kafka's twisted situations, often feeling like a transactional analysis experiment involving caricatures from the 1920s. Though it takes a moment to get oriented to the play's distinct style of speech and movement, the first act is almost uniformly strong. Much like a Bertolt Brecht play, the actors constantly point out the artifice of the production, speaking in narrative tones taken directly from the original Kafka stories, often adding "he said" and "I began" as qualifiers to their speech.

The sets are the bare minimum necessary to evoke the Eastern European urban decay of Kafka's time. The lighting is subtle and, like good theater lighting should, does not draw attention to itself. Once the audience adapts to the action, the play is a wonder to watch. Ideas and situations stream by at such a fast pace that individual moments get lost in the overall impression of loneliness and despair, with simple human actions described in a draconian syntax and the mir humiliations of everyday life turned into soul-crushing finales to sad and wasted lives.

But after the strength of the first act, the play loses its sense of momentum.

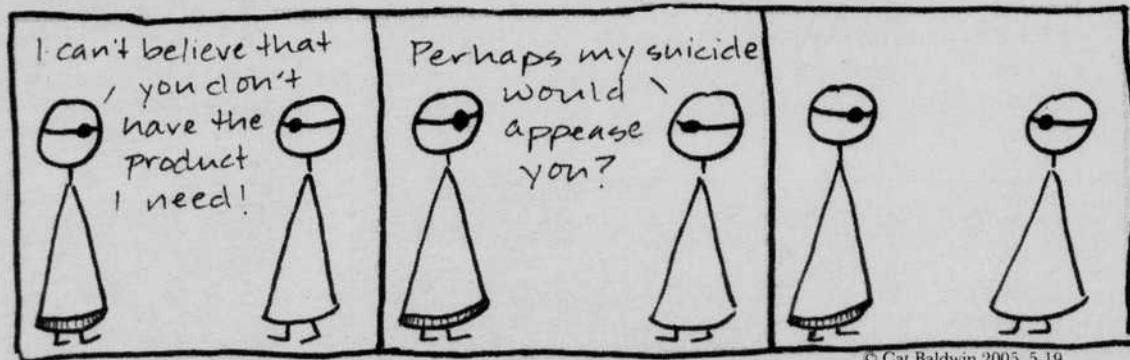
The second act moves from city life to life in the country, prison to warfare. Parables used to describe urban despair in the first act are reused in the second in the context of imprisonment or battle, a trick that is more obvious than it is interesting. What sense of coherency the play constructed in the beginning is completely lost, ideas no longer click together with the same sense of grace. The concluding parable, "Children on a Country Road," is delivered in such a manic style that it is difficult to keep up with the words, leaving the play to end on a note of incomprehension.

The play's faults are not the faults of the actors, however. Each performance is distinct, which is quite a feat considering the characters don't have names or set personalities. But often the source material works against the higher goals of the production. By attempting to reproduce Kafka's ornate prose style verbatim, the actors often end up spouting absurdly silly lines. What looks good on the page and what sounds good read aloud are often two distinctly different things.

The play continuously throws ideas, allusions and images at the audience, hoping some will stick. But having too many ideas is better than having none at all, and "Kafka Parables" manages to be intellectually stimulating in spite of its scattershot approach.

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