



According to Lincoln Center's new LCT3 project at its slogan, it takes "New Audiences for New Artists." It also takes new critics, hence the establishment of Theater Talk's New Theater Corps in 2005, a way for up-and-coming theater writers and eager new theatergoers to get exposure to the ever-growing theater scene in New York City. Writers for the New Theater Corps are given the opportunity to immerse themselves in the off-off and off-Broadway theater scene, learning and giving back high-quality reviews at the same time. Driven by a passion and love of the arts, the New Theater Corps aims to identify, support, and grow the arts community, one show and one person at a time.

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 "bug"—or Mr. Samsa himself—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 Conjurer* brings to mind both the anguished writers of Chekhov's *The Seagull* and Shakespeare's conflicted *Hamlet*. K is a man of constant soliloquies, and at one point, when pondering how to

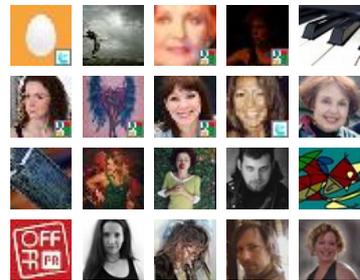
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release the worlds within him without tearing himself apart, goes so far as to say “That is the question.” The show is also littered with great lines (beyond the excerpted ones): “There is never enough time for endless hesitation.” The only ambiguous 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 director’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 can’t not watch. Brian Nishii (G) is the most engaging (with his flailing limbs and bug-like squats), but they’re all talented: Paula Wilson (N) speaks with eloquence and understanding, using Kafka’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, it’s Sara Thigpen (Felice, Kafka’s love) who steals the show (at the cost of having her heart broken night after night after night). Whereas Kafka’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 Kafka’s insecurities and obsessions, never married. That she doesn’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 you’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)
Tickets (212-279-4200): \$18.00
Schedule (to 11/4): Tuesday-Sunday @ 8:00; Saturday @ 3:00

Posted by Aaron Riccio at 10/22/2006 05:08:00 PM 

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Archive

- ▶ 2010 (19)
- ▶ 2009 (142)
- ▶ 2008 (280)
- ▶ 2007 (291)
- ▼ 2006 (177)
 - ▶ December 2006 (10)
 - ▶ November 2006 (6)
 - ▼ October 2006 (10)
 - The Fortune Teller
 - Neglect
 - The Great Conjuror
 - Season of Change: Marisol
 - Modern Living

Season of Change: True West

The Guys

Season of Change: Truce on
Uranus

Buried Child

Krankenhaus Blues

▶ September 2006 (12)

▶ August 2006 (15)

▶ July 2006 (6)

▶ June 2006 (18)

▶ May 2006 (16)

▶ April 2006 (13)

▶ March 2006 (25)

▶ February 2006 (11)

▶ January 2006 (35)

▶ 2005 (72)

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Learned from Musicals

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