

Metamorphosis

Yes, Mikhail can act.

By Alan Surrey

Metamorphosis, Kafka's chilling tale about an appalling transformation of a successful commercial traveller into an insect, was written as a short story in 1912. The play, adapted and directed by Steven Berkoff, was originally conceived in 1969 and has since enjoyed successful runs in both London and Paris prior to its American debut. The production currently previewing for three weeks at Duke University's Bryan Center before its transfer to Broadway far surpasses the achievements of the production I saw in London's West End several years ago – something of course, not unrelated to the contribution made by Mikhail Baryshnikov in the physically demanding role of Gregor.

Gregor Samsa lives with his mother, father and younger sister Greta, in a comfortable middle-class neighbourhood. Gregor's income is the sole means of support for the family; it is a responsibility he gladly accepts. Understandably, the family is horrified when one morning their idyllic, if somewhat indolent routine is thrown askew with the discovery Gregor has overnight undergone a metamorphosis – from human to giant insect. Gregor doesn't just resemble an insect, he *is* one. Though Gregor's relation to his work, his family, and to himself form the three distinct yet interrelated sections of the story, it is the changing relationship to his family that is the dominant focus of attention throughout the play. And though the author left no explanation of the work, the theme is believed in part to be Kafka's metaphor for the familial and societal response to terminal illness.

Gregor's family pass through three distinct phases of emotional response. Initially they are traumatized by the discovery. As time passes their shock gives way to a kind of distant acceptance of the reality that confronts them. Finally, their overwhelming and collective desire is to see Gregor die, ending not only his own pain, isolation and suffering, but also their own, which stems to a large degree from society's view of their predicament. If this is indeed what Kafka had in mind when he wrote *Metamorphosis*, how poignant it is when one considers for a moment contemporary society's response to AIDS patients.

Baryshnikov, in search of new creative outlets, as made a wise choice in his desire to perform this physically punishing role. Though not a trained actor in the sense generally perceived, he brings a powerful and dramatic grace to the character of Gregor who is trapped in a surreal yet inescapable existence, alienated from everything and every emotion that was once so familiar. The dramatic impact of the role is the fact that no costume or make-up is used to indicate the metamorphosis has taken place – only Baryshnikov's twitching and pulsating posture which is both hauntingly fascinating and utterly convincing.

If the magnet-like excitement generated by this play is due primarily to Baryshnikov's participation, the credit for its success must be shared equally with both an excellent supporting cast and the masterful direction of Steven Berkoff. Gregor's family exudes an almost parasitic quality in its relationship to him, and yet paradoxically, as his condition worsens, Mr. Samsa (Rene Auberjonois) becomes temporarily rejuvenated by his newly

imposed responsibilities to the rest of the family. Auberjonois portrays with perfect balance the human yet assertive patriarch caught in the recognition of his own failings. Madeleine Potter is superb as Greta, Gregor's sister. She alone in the family becomes reconciled to the transformation in as humane a way as possible. Laura Esterman as Mrs. Samsa portrays with poise the mother who is reviled by the transmogrification of her only son, preferring eventually to abstain from recognition of the guilt of such a response. When she and Greta remove the furniture from Gregor's room, they remove the last vestiges of Gregor's human dignity. The question of his identity is crucial in relation to their attitude.

Once the reality of the metamorphosis has been fully recognized, it is ignored by the family and eventually despised. Gregor has become incarcerated by both society and his own being, left to dwell on his fate in total and terrifying solitude. Mitch Kreindel as Gregor's employer and T.J. Meyers as the lodger complete an excellent cast that drives the production along through both the fascinating horror and the comic relief of its poignant insights.

Steven Berkoff, whose name is hallowed in British theatre, has excelled with his latest production. The synthesis of lights, sound and movement create a stunning image, used as they are within the framework of the minimalist set that appears as both web and cage. At the end of the performance I attended, Baryshnikov and the cast received a genuine and enthusiastic standing ovation, and one suspects that even in front of New York audiences, it may be something that they will have to get used to.



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