

THE PATH OF METAMORPHOSIS, OR THE SAMAS

Zornitsa Kamenova

The Samas based on **Franz Kafka's** *The Metamorphosis*, adapted for stage and directed by **Katya Petrova**, set design and puppets **Petya Karadzhova**, music **Hristo Yotsov**

Cast **Angel Kalev, Anna-Valeria Bostanyan, Velislava Marinkova, Dayana Dimitrova, Ivan Shumarov, Izabela Ivanova, Lyubomir Zhelev, Radoslava Nedelcheva**

A co-production of the Student's Theatre at the National Academy of Theatre and Film Arts and Puppet Theatre – Sliven, premiere March, 2015

Director and pedagogue Yuliya Ognyanova claims that a performance built on an associative etude basis that presumes improvisation and playing with the text is the most "oxygenous," the liveliest theatre. Together with Tedi Moskov and Alexander Morfov, Katya Petrova is among her most successful students who define the profile of Bulgarian theatre art now. Fed with Yuliya Ognyanova's ideas about theatre, each of them focuses in their own way on the figure of the "little man" – the clown with his pathetic, yet not hopeless existence. Tedi Moskov's approach is ironic as it identifies that character in its social and political context. Alexander Morfov finds the drama in life's everyday pressure on the "little man". And Katya Petrova seeks the existential dimensions of his life. She is also the most consistent in experimenting with the puppet theatre means, spaces and ideas.

Katya Petrova's directing attempts are a function of her interest in the serious

dramaturgical basis, and the post-modern principles of structuring the dramatic narrative, principles that she combines with improvisational devices in character building. Her performances aim at audiences of various ages. Some of her performances in recent years, such as *The Mousy King* (*Tsar Shushumiga*) by Konstantin Iliev, *The Tempest* by William Shakespeare, *La Collectionneuse* by Radoslav Chichev, have been defined as "puppet performances for adults", while others, e.g. *We, the Sparrows* by Yordan Radichkov, *The Story of a Seagull and a Gang of Tomcats*, based on a book by Luis Sepulveda, *A Fairy Tale of the Vagrant-King*, based on Karel Čapek's fairy tales are some good examples of "family performances," also referred to as "performances for both the young and grown-up."

The distinction between the two types of performances in her creative biography is rather speculative and it comes from the complexity of the problems touched upon in the dramaturgical material. Although

attractive to the youth audience, the performance of *The Samsas* breathes air and vital energy into the landscape of contemporary puppet theatre for adults.

I have had the chance of seeing the performance twice. The first time, at the end of the last theatre season, I knew more or less what to expect in a graduation performance of four-year students in Puppet Theatre Acting from Prof. Dora Ruskova's class at the National Academy of Theatre and Film Arts. As in every other student performance, I observed acting permeated with unbridled creative energy and inventive mixture of means coupled with academic diligence. The second time I saw that performance, now at the beginning of the new season on the professional stage at *Sfumato* Theatre Laboratory, the potential was skilfully mastered, crystallized into an overall synthetic performance,

a harmonic environment in which the unity of idea, substance and form was clearly deduced.

At first reading, the title directs us towards the chamber community of the Samsas from the novella *The Metamorphosis* by Franz Kafka, and the performance depicts the interpersonal relationships in it, revealed in the course of the unusual transformation of the problematic son and brother – Gregor Samsa. The performance is already running in front of the house when the actors with poker, distanced faces expressively made up in black and white and dressed in men's neutral black suits invite the audience into the house. This symbolic introduction to the space and story helps us see the point of view of the family in question: a metaphor of contemporary human society defined by its impossibility of finding a common language



Photo: Homo Ludens Archive

Angel Kalev, Anna-Valeria Gostanyan, Velislava Marinkova in *The Samsas*

and its intolerance to difference. The second beginning, now on stage, unfolds in front of us a delicate semantic parallel between the story of Gregor Samsa, who woke up one morning transformed into an insect, and Franz Kafka's personal history, skilfully intertwined into the overall dramaturgical narrative through excerpts from his diaries. This is the reason why the initial scene has a special emphasis: in it the writer is physically torn between loneliness-induced madness and the dream-like nightmarish reality: "I cannot sleep. Only dreams, no sleep. A monstrous world I carry in my head. Debts, the boss, the torments of travel. Unfriendly contact with people. A monstrous world with no escape but insanity!", he says.

This flagship opening text accompanies the writer's symbolic journey into the depths of his own consciousness, which gives birth to the "monstrous world of phantasms." This journey turns out to be the performance landmark metaphor, which subordinates and penetrates the entire imagery. Thus, while in Kafka's novella the metamorphosis is merely the rising action, used to reveal the characters and preliminary circumstances, the director's solution can be seen as a study of the "journey" and "transformation." The trip in the writer's consciousness and the impossibility of resolving the situation with the transformed Gregor continue until the end, maintaining the dynamic activity of the stage narrative. Entering the inner world of the man-insect does not aim to build character; he remains merely a figure whose external and internal changes and relations create the performance theatrical language. It is precisely in order to recreate the mutual penetration and merger between the real and the absurd, the conflict

between the corporeal and the spiritual, the drama of the individual and the interpersonal that the means offered by the puppet theatre art are put into place in their whole palette of possibilities.

The dramaturgical basis of the performance is intentionally heterogeneous, made up of landmark events, scenes or cues with no context from the narrative material of *The Metamorphosis*. There is little dialogue, the action is fractured and edited. Imbued with quotes from Kafka's diaries, the body of the text does not rely on causality. The figure of the writer himself appears (played by an actor) while the action is on which strengthens the sensation of fragmentariness and eliminates the observers. This directs the interpretations towards a more existential and metaphorical level, at times towards associations with Freud's psychoanalysis, at others towards biblical symbolism, or references to the domain of the unconscious and archetypes.

Overcoming literality is found in the stage imagery on several levels: once in the possibility of the puppet as a stage object, mostly in the impressive figure of the insect, but at yet another level – into the figures of the mother, the father and the sister of the Samsas – artificial, stylized masks with no faces and no connection to the bodies. Behind their masks, poker-faced, in black and white makeup, and in suits, the actors appear unabashed, without seeking any imitation, identification, or comment to their figures. This in-animation contrasts even more vividly with the mental drama that runs as a narrative inside the insect's consciousness engendered by its unsuccessful attempts to explain the situation to its (his) family and to be readmitted and respected, and –



Photo: Homo Ludens Archive

The Samsas

why not – loved by its (his) closest individuals. The insect's figure is represented by different systems-puppets of varying dimensions – in the beginning the insect is as big as a human body with attached mechanisms, which set the pairs of limbs in motion. This is an impressive director's move in the first scene when the rising action of the performance is the transformation of Kafka the writer into a creature born out of the monstrous world of his insanity. Then, as this creature is becoming more and more aware of its (his) new identity, oddity and difference as an insect, it (he) begins to get smaller, assumes the form of a smaller puppet, moved by several actors – with holders on the body and its (his) little feet, and at the end of its (his) life the creature is already a miniature marionette, whose seemingly appearance makes us feel

empathy for its (his) unhappy fate and bear the tragic denouement as we feel sympathy for this creature. After its (his) death, redemptive both to itself (himself) and to those around it (him), the figures of the mother, the father and the sister seem to break up, albeit barely, and the masked faces and the Samsa family members are animated in a slightly illuminating emotion. The puppets as well as the overall set and sound design environment supplement the text densely and inventively. The set design solution (made by artist Petya Karadzhova) is functional and simple – it consists of screens with flat slingshots enabling elements to be divided and brought in front of the screens for more emphasis. In this way, for example, the mother's fit is effectively presented when she first meets her transformed son – she falls backwards,

while the pulled apart, dismembered limbs and head are sticking out between the screens. Then, the said screen is used as a table from which plates and glasses come out; as a wall on which the insect creeps; as a door room behind/in front of which the transformation occurs, or as a window with raindrops knocking on it (sounds of moving slingshots). Even more interesting is the sound environment solution (the composer is Hristo Yotsov, who often works with this director), which combines sound recording and voice characteristic of the insect-human – inarticulate but recognizable sounds as in children’s play, beatbox, music score (we cannot help but mention the talented acting performance of debutant Lyubomir Zhelev) and effective lyric music, intensifying the dramatism in the moment of Gregor’s death, for instance.

The idea of the impossible contact is most palpably present in the repeated scenes with the attempts of the family members (the three inanimate mannequins with severed mask-heads) to share a table and discuss Gregor. The imposing cue “Thank you, I am not hungry!” in these moments reflects their absolute unwillingness to even taste their common food, to share their emotions, their thoughts, and, ultimately, to find a way towards one an-

other, to find in themselves the necessity of a common language and contact in order to resolve the situation.

In Katya Petrova’s words: “the performance offers not a shelter but knowledge. It has been said that with much wisdom comes much sorrow. Thus knowledge achieved by sacrifice is an overcoming, an inner victory, and it opens the doors to the universe of hope.” Indeed the biblical symbol of knowledge – the apple – is transformed in the performance into a means for Gregor’s murder but it also becomes a unifying force that is shared by the whole family through the sacrifice in the end (the insect’s demise); each of them actually takes a bite of an apple, and the family/society seems symbolically to find a common language that “opens the doors of hope.”

Gregor Samsa has made his journey. The performance has also gone its way full of hope from a students’ graduation performance to a full-fledged one on the bill of *Sfumato* Theatre Laboratory.

Published in Homo Ludens 2016/No. 19

*Translated by
Atanas Igov*