

***The Trial* – A Review by Upper Sixth Former Jamie Williams**

It's fitting that my reviewing period at the school began with a Berkoff production, and that one of my last ones will be one too. *The Trial* is one of Stephen Berkoff's most well-known plays - adapted from a discarded text by Franz Kafka of *Metamorphosis* fame, Berkoff originally staged it in London in 1970, and Mrs Keylock, who directed it, remained faithful to the original staging via use of the main prop: 10 wooden doors with harsh neon around the frames: eerily lighting the set with a aquamarine glow. Above, 15 open lightbulbs guttered spasmodically, emphasising Mrs Keylock's underground adaptation. With her new version being set in an underground district of Prague in 2036, this creative choice nicely intensified the dystopian theme of the play, with phrases such as 'Unit 56,' 'The Inspector,' 'Scanning,' 'Genetic Technicians,' and 'The Authority,' chilling the audience.

Even then, the staging was a hybrid between a traditional Proscenium Arch and a three-sided thrust stage, forming a half octagon, further heightening the unsettling tone of the show. The elongated horizontal sides were lined with stools, on which the Chorus sat, clad in white shirts, black braces and black trousers; each also sported face paint that exaggerated an emotion, alienating the audience (and K himself, whose glasses and red and silver striped tie made it all the more clear that everyone was against him). Yet these soulless spirits had life to them.

But it wasn't the set and the creative choices that were bleak. The actors' performances made it clear that Joseph K, the protagonist, (Will Roberts) was up against a world where the system had truly failed. Roberts himself sustained a demanding task throughout the performance; not only was he the leading man, and had to carry the whole show, he had to act naturalistically in the face of sinister Berkovian bouffons. From naively protesting his innocence to the inquisitorial Guards (Theo Artus and Max Pearson), to pleading for the aged lawyer Huld (Sami Hundal)'s assistance, to breaking down at the unanimously guilty verdict, Roberts was a tour de force, blindingly stumbling through a world where justice meant nothing. Like Albert Camus' pessimistic protagonist Meursault in the absurdist French novel *L'Étranger*, his Joseph K was appalled (as we were enthralled) by the fact that he is judged for who he is, and not whatever 'crime' he committed.

The Guards might have been small in stature (sorry, Theo...), but, aided by the Berkovian style, certainly larger than life. Artus almost continued his comic Mr Bumble character in *Oliver* a year before, but gave his Guard a grim sense of foreboding and an icy stare that was matched by Pearson's ever-present thuggish smirk. They slimily sneered and strained their necks to prove to K that it was all downhill from there - true representations of the Berkovian style. Another agent of the Authority, the imposing gravitas of Cole Balachandran's Inspector proved that K was destined for doom. His snarky sneer and bossy attitude, coupled with a marionette-esque swagger, shoulders pounding like pistons from side to side gave him an air of perfect dominance.

The kindness and concern of Mrs Grubach, the landlady, and K's fellow tenant in the flat, Miss Burstner, (Shreya Arun and Jaya Chambers respectively), were impressive. Their earnest emotions, torn between Berkovian and naturalistic styles, suggested that they were struggling to comply with the state, wrenched between self-doubt and loyalty to (or is that fear of?) the state. The legal team of Leni (Sara Bhandari) and Huld were kind to K, but offered no answers to the now distraught K. Bhandari took on roles of both a legal aide and carer for her ageing boss with sincerity and passion, and sad, pitying eyes (but slipped back into an emotionless Chorus member with ease). Hundal portrayed the smoking corpse of Huld with bellowing croaking coughs and a bent back, staggering around seemingly uncontrollably, with perfect, cracked Received Pronunciation, his hair parched and white down one side, looking for all the world like Batman's Two Face.

Joshua Cooke astounded as the cold, emotional Bailiff, but more so as the simian Block. This was a man driven mad by the wait for his case to be examined, and Cooke bounded around the floor on hands and knees, more simian than human, sprawling, swiping around the stage, driven to hysteria by his status as a 'No-Person,' with his staccato rocking being eroded to a gibbering acceptance as he was dragged away. Berkoff himself would have been proud. Another Cooke (not related), Louis, flamboyantly flounced around his collection of paintings as the art collector and agent of the Authority, Titorelli. He displayed awesome power as an allegory of the state's manipulation, by moving his very lifelike paintings (the Chorus in the door frames) with glee, his mix of French and Italian accents highlighting that fact that there was no escape for K, who remained who he was, not complying with the cruel world he was thrust into. Sam Maling as the Clerk and Technician suitably bowed and sniggered when dealing with the incredulous K, somehow knowing that K would meet a fate worse than death... waiting forever.

The Chorus emphasised this, and more. Most of the aforementioned cast acted as a chorus member, but the reinforcements of Robert Parrish, Tom Deardon, Luca Moretto, Zachary Wasterfall and Oscar Easterbrook made the cast complete, and their door work was stunning. By swaying through the lighted doors, they resembled flickering static on an eternal path to a neon purgatory. They enclosed K in a fence from which he could not escape - his own paranoid mind. They used them as office spaces, an inertia-filled subway, dimly lit corridors, (to anything from execution to torture- it was up to the audience to guess), and even K's own paranoid mind, leaning in oppressively to provoke anything but calm and analytical thoughts. Their vocal delivery ticked all the standard Berkovian boxes: insidious cacophony demonstrated that the Chorus could be representations of K's own mounting dread and paranoia (highlighted by the doors leaning ominously inward on the cowering K); their robotically contrasted unison perfectly reflected a moulded, hive-mind society; their pitch bends and fluctuations when portraying city life or individually. Even though some of the stylistic running scenes were more *Chariots of Fire* than chaos and fear, to rehearse and perform a tricky text and vision in just four weeks is certainly a feat to be proud of. The cast as a whole performed an impressive showcase of Berkoff's techniques. Berkoff himself advocated a highly physical style, and wanted to 'express something to the utmost of its potential... so you can go no further with it.' And they certainly did that.

The spooky nature of the show was emphasised by the industrial electronic hybrid music style, composed by Mr Rooke, and performed partly with Mr Bantock's creaking, creepy cello - it was as staccato as the physicality of the actors, jerking around with them as K was sent to a place of infinite rest. The technical team of Blue Galtos, Charlie Faulkner, Mr Pharoah, Jacob Foster and Mr Tearle dazzled as much as their lights; from the dim bulbs flickering at moments of despair, to Titorelli's studio, resplendent with dark swirls of purple and green light, to the eerie blue of the underground setting, they delivered the goods with suitable panache.

The final scene was the most poignant. All the cast stared at the audience, K now in utter terror, looking at us for confirmation. We were the judge, and since we could do nothing, K was condemned - but to what? And for what crime? Why? The last image perfectly resembled that all hope had gone - a flickering light bulb above K's weeping, convulsing body slowly dimming to blackout. As my time reviewing for the school comes to an end (though at the time of writing, I'm not sure whether this will be my last production), the fading light is a poignant parallel. Huge congratulations to Mrs Keylock for staging and developing an outstanding production, and to the cast for making the audience feel interrogated and on trial themselves. If justice means nothing, let it be known that this production still meant something to all who saw it.