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Surreal Storytelling

Open Fist transforms Kafka's 'Amerika' into theatrical odyssey

By Bridgette M. Redman
Pasadena Weekly Contributor

When Franz Kafka wrote his first novel between 1911 and 1914, it was a fantasy of what it would be like to disappear in a country he'd never visited — the United States.

Now, Dietrich Smith, an Emmy-award winning writer, has reimagined the story into a stage play that will be playing on the Open Fist stage at Atwater Village Theatre from Oct. 17 to Nov. 22. As playwright and Director, Smith has recruited the seven-time Academy Award-winning sound designer Gary Rydstrom to create a soundscape for the show and John R. Dilworth, the creator of "Courage the Cowardly Dog," to design animation sequences.

"Amerika, or, The Man Who Disappeared" features a 17-year-old arriving in America on a steamer after fleeing his home to escape scandal — he was assaulted by a housemaid who then became pregnant.

"'Amerika' was the first work of Kafka's I ever read, and I instantly fell in love with its adventurous, comedic spirit," Smith said. "It has a youthful energy that's unique in his canon. According to his diary, one of Kafka's inspirations for this novel was Charles Dickens, specifically 'David Copperfield.' I hope I've captured the bold Dickensian style that he so masterfully turned to his own ends. It's a great story, and inherently theatrical. And being a tale about the trials of an immigrant, it has an ever-increasing relevance."

It was 1990 when Smith first read the novel and he was then busy working in film and television. He immediately knew that he wanted to do something with it — someday.

"It has a nice narrative flow and it's very funny," Smith said. "It read like an adventure or odyssey, which was a genre I really liked."

In the early 2000s, he became a literary manager for Open Fist and started think-



Ethan Remez-Cott and Matthew Goodrich in "Amerika, or, The Man Who Disappeared."

(Amanda Weier/Submitted)

ing about adapting "Amerika" into a stage play, in part because it was inherently theatrical and he felt it would work better in that format than as a screenplay. He started writing a version in 2007, but life intervened, taking him away from theater until after the pandemic. He was finally able to pull the story out, finish writing it, do a reading and finalize it for a full production with Open Fist.

The original novel is only around 200 pages and Smith said he was able to incorporate almost all of it. He follows the book's original narrative structure, divid-

ing it into eight sections that follow the 17-year-old Karl as he's first taken in and then exiled by his uncle, goes on the road with two tramps, works in a hotel as a lift boy, is trapped in a tenement with someone who abuses him and then joins a theater company.

Smith said the story has echoes of Dickens' "David Copperfield," with characters that are larger than life. He chose to lean into the story's comedic energy, even while acknowledging that there are dark elements to the tale.

"Underneath it is the trauma that the

lead character, Karl, had undergone," Smith said. "He's been banished from his home by parents because he impregnated the maid when she basically assaulted him. He's carrying a lot of baggage that's underneath all the comedy."

The abuse continues as he travels through America.

Karl is played by Ethan Remez-Cott, who recently appeared in the company's "Bat Boy the Musical." He's joined by an ensemble of actors who play multiple parts, including Tambrie Allsup, Matthew Goodrich, Kelsey Kusnitz, Kevin Michael Moran, Jeremy Reiter II, Debba Rofheart, Chima Rok, Jade Santana, Jack David Sharpe, Grace Soens and Jeremy Thompson.

Smith said Remez-Cott was a great fit for the role of Karl.

"It's a difficult character because he's got all this trauma, but he's also a young 17-year-old who's still got some optimism," Smith said. "He wants to be an engineer and he's constantly looking for these opportunities, even when he's thwarted. So you need a combination of somebody who can have that optimism and sense of adventure while underneath there's something that's roiling — that he's traumatized."

He said Remez-Cott was very touching during auditions and embodied the vision he had of Karl. Smith said he knew he needed an actor who could carry the show as he is in every single scene.

"He fits it pretty naturally," Smith said of Remez-Cott. "He's got great instincts. He's a really good, instinctive actor who is very much at ease on stage. It's been fun really finding the character with him."

Smith describes Open Fist, which has been creating theater for 35 years, as a wonderful company with a stable of dedicated actors. In an age where most theaters are focusing on small-cast shows, this one leans into the feel of epic storytelling with a large cast.

SEE **STORYTELLING** PAGE 14

10.09.25 | PASADENA WEEKLY 13

STORYTELLING FROM PAGE 13

"It's got a lot of characters, it's got a lot of depth, it's got a lot going on," Smith said. "It's a full journey."

Smith also knew he'd need a creative technical team to pull off a story that moves from multiple locations on a small stage. They needed to find a way that depicted those locations while capturing the surreal nature of Kafka's writing. Smith was also committed to a pacing that moved quickly between scenes without a need to reset the stage or take the lights down and pause the story.

Instead, he moves the audience along with lighting changes and a soundscape. In the hotel, the audience hears all the elevators, when Karl enters a creepy, Gothic house, the audience hears the winds and odd creaks.

"The sound really has that ability to tell you where you are and take you to a level that's not necessarily realistic — it tells you (that) you are in a strange world," Smith said. "Gary's really great at that — it's what he's done in film for a long time. He's been really superb."

Rydstrom designed sound for such mov-



Debba Rofheart and Marc Jablon in "Amerika, or, The Man Who Disappeared."

(Amanda Weier/Submitted)

ies as "Jurassic Park," "Titanic," "Terminator 2" and "Saving Private Ryan," but this is his first foray into theater.

Smith, who was a writer for such shows as "Arthur," "RoboCop: Alpha Commander" and "Doug," had worked with Dilworth many years ago. As he was

working on "Amerika," he got to a moment that he wasn't sure how to make work. So he called Dilworth and began brainstorming solutions.

"As I talked to him, I realized the animation could get us from one location to the next," Smith said. "It could solve a lot of problems as far as how we get from the city to the country and from here to there. It expanded to several scenes and then became a really fun mechanism to let us see locations and keep us in this odd world of Kafka. They create a state of mood and a colorful, whimsical kind of quality which I wanted throughout the show. I wanted it to be very toy-like."

The book's title was chosen by the publisher when the novel was published posthumously with the "k" replacing the "c" because it was German. Smith said he believes Kafka saw America as a sort of Wonderland. A place he'd heard stories about from relatives who had immigrated here.

"He'd never been to America," Smith said. "What you're seeing is a kind of odyssey of a young person coming to a strange land that he doesn't know which is full of surprises—things that are unexpected and surreal. He's encountering one adventure after another that informs himself about who he is and what cruelties a land like America can inflict on him, but also what possibilities."



Grace Soens in "Amerika, or, The Man Who Disappeared."

(Amanda Weier/Submitted)

Acknowledging that Kafka means a lot of different things to different people, Smith said that "Amerika" taps into his absurdist qualities. It isn't realistic, Smith said, but it captures what you feel in your head when something really absurdly cruel and unjust is happening. It is also a story that is unflinching in its acknowledgement that people participate in their own trauma.

"The main character is sort of complicated," Smith said. "Even though society is oppressing you with all these things, there's a part of you that may feel you're responsible, you're at fault, if this is happening, you're guilty. On some level, the character just thinks he's guilty"

Karl, Smith said, was assaulted, but a part of him grapples with whether he was responsible or at fault. There is an obsession with law, justice and whether the character feels he is doing the right thing. While the work is dark, Smith says there is hope in the story and some good things happen to the protagonist.

"It's told with a lot of humor and comedy with a focus on making it as energetic as possible, but at the end, he is the man who disappeared," Smith said. ■

"Amerika, or, The Man Who Disappeared"

WHEN: Oct. 17-Nov. 22, Fridays at 7:30 p.m., Saturdays at 7 p.m., Sundays at 2 p.m., Monday, Oct. 20 at 7:30 p.m.

WHERE: Atwater Village Theater, 3269 Casitas Ave, Los Angeles

COST: \$26-\$45

INFO: openfst.org, 323-882-6912