

PLAYBILL®

The Open Fist Theatre Company
Los Angeles, CA

 **OpenFist**
theatre company

presents

AMERIKA

OR THE MAN WHO
DISAPPEARED

an adaptation
of the novel by
**FRANZ
KAFKA**

written and
directed by
**DIETRICH
SMITH**

OCT 17
through
NOV 22

for **TICKETS &
SHOWTIMES**



OpenFist.org

The Open Fist Theatre Company
Presents

AMERIKA OR, THE MAN WHO DISAPPEARED

an adaptation of the novel by Franz Kafka

Written & Directed by
Dietrich Smith

ENSEMBLE

Debba Rofheart **
Matthew Goodrich
Jack Sharpe **
Jade Santana **

Ethan Remez-Cott **
Marc Jablon *
Jeremy D. Thompson **
Tambrie Allsup
*AEA Members **OFTC Members

Grace Soens **
Chima Rok **
Kelsey Kusinitz **

Producers

Amanda Weier & Derek Manson

Scenic Design

Frederica Nascimento

Costume Design

A. Jeffrey Schoenberg

Lighting Design

Gavan Wyrick

Drops Artist

Elizabeth Moore

Animations

John R. Dilworth

Sound Design

Gary Rydstrom

Set Builder

Brad Bentz

Stage Manager

John Dimitri

Programmer

Nick Foran

Props

Shen Heckel

Assistant Director

Barbara Schofield

Dialect Coach
Deborah Ross-Sullivan

Fight Choreographer

Tambrie Allsup

Fight Choreography

Tambrie Allsup

Graphic Designer

D Morris

Assistant Lighting Designer

Grace Berry

Assistant Programmer

Jacob Carty

Public Relations

Lucy Pollak

"Falling Man" art used with permission of artist Richard Bosman

DIRECTORS NOTE

Long ago, in the year 1980, a friend gave me a Christmas present of *The Trial* and insisted I read it. I would love it, he said. Love it! Yet years passed before I could bring myself to touch not only *The Trial* but anything by Kafka. I had somehow eluded exposure to his work in both high school and college and knew little of him other than the occasional Woody Allen joke, yet still had managed to develop an inexplicable trepidation of entering his world. What was it exactly that kept me away? I normally had no fear of dark material, in fact often embraced it. Why did I think this author in particular would pull me into a pit of despair I could never escape? I don't know, but that gift (which I still have) gathered layers of dust on my bookshelf.

A decade later, I encountered an extraordinary exhibition of paintings at MOCA by the art teacher Tim Rollins and his South Bronx middle-school collective K.O.S. (Kids of Survival). Canvases constructed from pages of Kafka's *Amerika* were covered with an intricate network of fantastical gold shapes. Rollins had instructed his students to read *Amerika*, sketch their own versions of the horns blown by a troupe of angels in the book's final chapter, then intertwine and paint these horns in gold on the book-page canvases. The result: Webs of wonder and mystery into which one could sink and remain, willingly, forever.

Well, now I had to read Kafka. I immediately obtained a copy of *Amerika* and took the plunge.

What I discovered in the novel was not a pit of despair but an odyssey full of humor and endless invention. Yes, it got dark, but without ever losing its comic touch. I read the rest of his work in quick succession and realized my friend had been right—I did "love it"—yet *Amerika* was easily my favorite.

Why was that? An early, unfinished work, it is by no means Kafka's most profound. He wrote the bulk of it in a quick three-month burst of inspiration at the end of 1912 (at the age of 29), between *The Judgment* and *The Metamorphosis*, then didn't touch it until adding one more chapter in 1914—at the start of World War I—after which he dropped it altogether, shifting his attention to *The Trial* and shorter works. While initially so delighted with what he was crafting that he regularly read excerpts aloud to friends (and published the first chapter as a standalone story), he ultimately became so dissatisfied with it that he demanded his friend Max Brod destroy the entire manuscript after his death. (Of course, Brod didn't...and tellingly, neither had Kafka.) Initially intended as a variation on *David Copperfield*—a boy's eventful journey into adulthood, but this time in an exotic land—he found his own imagination taking him instead to a place of no return. But still, that place alternated its darkness with light, defeat with recovery, and despair with (oddly for Kafka) tendrils of hope. And so, despite its downward trajectory, this tale of a forsaken German immigrant became the tale of us all—groping our way through a world that arbitrarily gives and takes and does not want to help us, spinning our wheels between active resistance and passive resignation, all the while wondering if our misfortunes are not the world's fault at all but our own...and without ever being granted an answer.

It is 101 years since Kafka's death, and while the America he was writing about is not the one we currently inhabit (nor was it really the America of 1912—Kafka could only read and dream about it, he never left Europe), it is hard not to connect the cruelties the immigrant Karl Rossmann encounters with the cruelties currently being inflicted on our entire immigrant population. Kafka imagined a Statue of Liberty bearing a sword instead of a torch, and that image now has a potency he could not have predicted. So perhaps that is the secret of this book. Particular yet universal, it embodies the torch that Kafka replaced—a flame held aloft that never expires.

CAST

Cast Members

Karl Rossman	Ethan Remez-Cott
Woman / German Woman / Ensemble	Kelsey Kusinitz
The Stoker / Pollunder / Ensemble	Jeremy D. Thompson
Captain / Delamarche / Ensemble	Chima Rok
Uncle Jacob / Head Waiter / Ensemble	Marc Jablon
Head Purser / Robinson / Ensemble	Matthew Goodrich
Schubal / Mr. Green / Ensemble	Jack Sharpe
Teacher / Giacomo / Ensemble	Jade Santana
Klara / Fergusson/ Ensemble	Tambrie Allsup
Head Cook / Brunelda / Ensemble	Debba Rofheart
Therese / Angel / Ensemble	Grace Soens

CREW

Crew Members

Director/Adaptor	Dietrich Smith
Assistant Director	Barbara Schofield
Producers	Amanda Weier & Derek Manson
Stage Manager	John Dimitri
Scenic Designer	Frederica Nascimento
Lighting Designer	Gavan Wyrick
Costume Designer	A. Jeffrey Schoenberg
Sound Designer	Gary Rydstrom
Drops Artist	Elizabeth Moore
Animator	John R. Dilworth
Set Builder	Brad Bentz
Programmer	Nick Foran

WHO'S WHO



Ethan Remez-Cott

as Karl Rossman

Ethan is thrilled to be a part of the wonderful cast of *Amerika*, having recently appeared on the Open Fist stage as Rick in *Bat Boy: The Musical*! He studied musical theater at The Boston Conservatory for two years and has recently graduated from Occidental college with his BA in Theater. He has been seen in *Witch!* with Downtown Rep, and was in *As You Like It* with the Independent Shakespeare Company this past summer. He is very excited to be working with the talented people at Open Fist. He'd like to thank his wonderful professors dating all the way back to his time as LACHSA (Los Angeles County High School for the Arts), his awesome friends, and of course his incredibly supportive parents who were ok with him majoring in theater.



Jeremy D. Thompson

as The Stoker / Pollunder / Ensemble

is newly of the company and proud to make his legit debut after being part of the *This Week This Week* rabble. Most recently, he played Dr. Paul Morgan in the world premiere of *Unsweet Perdition* by Evan Spreen. Previous favorites include *Hamlet* (Polonius), *Into the Woods* (Narrator/Mysterious Man), *Tartuffe* (Orgon), and *An Enemy of the People* (Hovstad). In July, he directed *Stupid Fucking Bird* at The MAIN and *Talk to Me Like the Rain* and *Let Me Listen* for Hollywood Fringe. His next directorial effort is *The Fantasticks*, opening in January.



Marc Jablon

as Uncle Jacob / Head Waiter / Ensemble

Professional actor of 30 years, Marc couldn't be more excited to be making his Open Fist debut and his first stage appearance in way too long! Recent credits includes guest-starring on the Peacock series *Ted*; Showtime's *Super-Pumped: The Battle for Uber*. TV: *Community*, *Without a Trace*, *ER* (recurring), *NUMB3RS*, *Bones*, *Medium*. Stage: New American Theatre, Sacred Fools, Victory Gardens Theater, Williamstown Theatre Festival. Utah Shakespearean Festival, Marc is also a widely sought after public speaking coach. M.F.A. University of Washington. Representation: McClain Entertainment. Special thanks to Anna Khaja and Amanda Weier for making this happen!

WHO'S WHO



Debba Rofheart

as Head Cook / Brunelda / Ensemble

is an LA based actor, born and raised in Long Island, New York, where her mom dragged her to shows in Manhattan, from early childhood. It was there, in Broadway's theaters, that the magic of performing infused her. She earned her BFA in Theatre Performance from the University of Florida, but did not pursue acting professionally until after a long indentured servitude as a corporate wage slave. Since her emancipation, she has returned to acting. Theatre is her great love and Shakespeare's works most especially. Favorite roles are, Peter Quince in Open Fist Theatre Company's acclaimed production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*; and King Cymbeline, with The Porters of Hellsgate. She is a proud member of Open Fist, The Vagrancy, and Playground-LA theatre companies; and of SAG-AFTRA and Actors' Equity Association unions. Thank you for supporting live theatre!



Grace Soens

as Therese / Angel / Ensemble

is excited to play Therese in OFTC's production of *Amerika*. A company member since 2023, she has performed in three shows at OFTC: you may have seen her earlier this year in *Bat Boy: The Musical*. Since graduating with her Acting BFA from AMDA LA in 2019, Grace has acted in a variety of plays and immersive experiences throughout LA. When not acting she enjoys making puns, dismantling the patriarchy, and spoiling her pet parrot Rue. She hopes you enjoy the show and thanks you for supporting live theatre! IG: grace.soens



Tambrie Allsup

as Klara / Fergusson/ Ensemble

enjoys acting, and studied theater at The American Musical and Dramatic Academy. She is a certified advanced actor combatant with the SAFD (Society of American Fight Directors) and has assisted with teaching in various weapon certification classes. Her first collaboration with Open Fist was as fight director for the production of *Bat Boy: The Musical*, and Tambrie is excited to return to the company. Additional fight direction credits include *Billie The Stage Play* at the Broadwater Theatre, as well as acting and choreographing in the short film *The Inflection Scheme*. Her most recent acting credit was performing as the Tiefling; Evalina, at the Dungeons and Dragons experience for Universal Studios Fan Fest Nights. She's incredibly thankful for this opportunity and for her family, whose continuous support has attributed to her success with pursuing her passions and telling different stories!

WHO'S WHO



Jack Sharpe *as Schubal / Mr. Green / Ensemble*

is an actor at the Open Fist. He is a graduate of UCB and Second City. He has performed at Open Fist in *Blood At The Root*, *Musical Fools*, *To The Bone* and *Starmites*, as well as in the sketch show *This Week This Week*. Enjoy the show!



Chima Rok *as Captain / Delamarche / Ensemble*

is a magnetic actor and singer trained at Second City, Groundlings, and the Ruskin School of Acting's two-year Meisner conservatory. He has built a reputation for bringing complex, unpredictable characters to life with a blend of charm, menace, and raw emotional power. Theatre credits in 2025 include the musicals *Bat Boy: The Musical* (Rev. Hightower) at Open Fist Theatre and *Flashes of Light* (Mark Twain) at Sierra Madre Playhouse, showcasing his dynamic vocal and physical presence. On screen, Chima has appeared in a variety of television projects, further demonstrating his versatility across genres. Known for moving seamlessly between dark humor and intense vulnerability, he embodies the volatile spirit of Delamarche in *Amerika* with razor-sharp intensity and captivating stage presence.

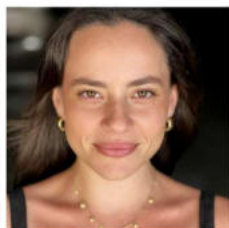


Matthew Goodrich

as Head Purser / Robinson / Ensemble

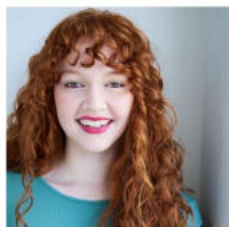
trained at California Institute of the Arts and Santa Monica College, where he studied acting and performance. Favorite stage credits include Malvolio in *Twelfth Night* (California Institute of the Arts), Jean in *Rhinoceros* (Santa Monica College), and Macbeth in *Flamenco Macbeth!* at the Kennedy Center American College Theatre Festival. His work includes both classical and contemporary theatre, with a focus on exploring physicality and psychological depth. As well as stage work, he has collaborated on experimental performance projects and new play development. Matthew is grateful to his professors, peers, and family for their ongoing encouragement, support and inspiration.

WHO'S WHO



Jade Santana *as Teacher / Giacomo / Ensemble*

Jade is excited to be back at the Open Fist Theatre Company! She was previously seen on this stage in *Anna in the Tropics*, for which she earned a Broadway World Award nomination for Best Featured Actress. Other more recent theatre credits include *Lend Me a Tenor* (International City Theatre). All the way from Brazil, Jade is always grateful to be a part of storytelling that matters. Love to her family across oceans, and to every teacher and friend who's helped shape the path. With a special thank you to Judith Bohannon, whose presence continues to guide.



Kelsey Kusinitz *as Woman / German Woman / Ensemble*

is excited to make her Open Fist debut! Her love for theatre started as a child and grew into a serious passion at Stagedoor Manor, where she attended for seven summers. She has her BFA in Performing Arts from AMDA Los Angeles. Kelsey is SO excited to be back on the stage!

Dietrich Smith

Director/Adaptor

After many years away, Dietrich is delighted to return to the theater he once called home. As Open Fist's literary manager from 1999-2006, he helped program seasons that included *The History of Communism as Explained to Mental Patients*, *King Stag*, *Three Sisters*, *The Knacker's ABC*, *Wooden Brecks*, *Casanova*, *Fen*, *Flight*, *Songs of Joy and Destitution*, *As I Lay Dying*, *Playhouse Creatures*, *The Devils* and *The Cosmonaut's Last Message to the Woman He Once Loved in the Former Soviet Union*. He acted in and directed others, notably *Marie and Bruce*, *Mud* and *Lydie Breeze* (LA Weekly nom. Best Revival). He spent the rest of his time writing and story editing, beginning long ago with Nickelodeon's *Doug* and continuing on with PBS's *Arthur* (3 Emmy Awards), *Martha Speaks*, *Curious George* and, most recently, *Hop*. However, theater remains his first love, and the opportunity to bring *Amerika* to the stage is one he has dreamed of for a very long time.

Barbara Schofield

Assistant Director

is thrilled to be working with this wonderful group of actors and playwright, Dietrich Smith, on his amazing adaptation of Kafka's *Amerika!* Barbara is an award-winning director [*Incident at Vichy*, *Silent Sky*, *Arcadia*, *The Fantastiks* [with co-director James Fowler]. A long time member of the Open Fist, Barbara serves as Literary Manager, Actor [*Light Up the Sky*, *Mad Forest*, *St. Joan and the Dancing Sickness*, *Elephant's Graveyard*, *The Gary Plays*; along with many First Look Festivals] and frequent Director [*Dancing at Lughnasa* - multiple Broadway World noms; the LA premiere of Tom Stoppard's *Rock 'n Roll*; L.A. professional premiere of *Machinal*; and *Stage Door*-LA Weekly Nom. for Best Director] as well as Director of last year's First Look workshop production *King Lear Part 1: The Unravelling*. Barbara also serves as the Chair of the Acting Division of the AMDA College of the Performing Arts, Hollywood Campus.

Amanda Weier & Derek Manson

Producers

met at Northwestern and have produced a handful of shows around town, including EST's award-winning West Coast Premiere of Gregory Moss' *House of Gold*, directed by Gates McFadden, and the World Premiere of Paul Sand's *The Pilot Who Crashed The Party* at The Broadwater. Amanda also recently produced *Bat Boy: The Musical* and *Blood At The Root* for The Open Fist, where she serves as one of the Artistic Directors. Like probably all 99-seat theatre producers, what they really want to do is act and direct, of which they've done a fair share. Derek recently played The Baker in *Into The Woods* (MTW) and Orin in *Little Shop of Horrors* (SCR). He will soon appear in Inkwell's *Paper Walls* at The Broadwater. Amanda recently played Maureen in Catherine Butterfield's *To The Bone* (OFTC & Theatre 68) and she directed the BFA mainstage production of *She Kills Monsters* at AMDA, where she is a proud faculty member.

John Dimitri

Stage Manager

John is thrilled to be a part of this production of *Amerika!* He's spent a lifetime in the Arts and has worn many hats, including Stage Manager, Assistant Stage Manager, Actor, Tech Director, Assistant Tech Director, Lighting Designer, Sound Designer, Scenic Designer, Set Builder, Script Supervisor, Photographer, Videographer, and Running Crew. In addition to his work with Open Fist, John is an AMDA graduate, has spent years as an IATSE Local 33 Stagehand, and lent his skills to various theatre/film/event companies, including Sierra Madre Playhouse, Downtown Rep., The Fountain, Vesper Theatre Company, Children's Theatre Experience, Story Tailors, Netflix, CBS, J-Fox Events, Pasadena City College and Glendale Community College. He'd like to thank his friends & family--especially his mother Barbara Schofield--for their constant love & support no matter the hat worn!

CREW WHO'S WHO

Gary Rydstrom

Sound Designer

has sound designed and mixed many films, including *Terminator 2*, *Jurassic Park*, *A River Runs Through It*, *Toy Story*, *Quiz Show*, *Titanic*, *Saving Private Ryan*, *Star Wars: Episode I*, *Punch-Drunk Love*, *Finding Nemo*, and *Ad Astra*. He has won seven Academy Awards for Sound. Many years ago he went to the School of Cinema at the University of Southern California, where he met Dietrich Smith (Director). Putting the "old dog can't learn new tricks" adage to shame, this is Gary's first sound job for live theater.

Elizabeth Moore

Drops Artist

is a boundary-pushing creative whose work fuses fine art, immersive design, and powerful storytelling. With roots in painting, her visual language runs through everything she touches—from interior spaces with her studio Froote Design, to conceptual narratives that challenge & inspire. Currently she is developing *Hedges and Lagoons*, a modern opera endorsed since 1996 by Dr. Noel Brown of the UN Environmental Program. Its message is more urgent than ever: our planet is in climate chaos. Alongside this, Elizabeth is launching SXY BEAR, a bold, design-driven product that explores identity & emotional resonance. She's also the enigmatic mind behind Lady Velvet, a hidden persona peeling back the glamorous façade of Hollywood. Through it all, Elizabeth's lifelong love of painting continues to fuel her pursuit of meaningful, transformative work.

John R. Dilworth

Animator

Academy Award nominated director John R. Dilworth is a New York-based animation director and filmmaker whose work has appeared on Netflix, Showtime, HBO, FOX, Cartoon Network, Nickelodeon, MTV, Canal +, and Arte. His films have screened in museums including the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Museum of Modern Art, and the Guggenheim Museum in New York City. He is the founder of Stretch Films, Inc., an independent animation studio, producing the Cartoon Network TV series, *Courage The Cowardly Dog*, which he created.

Howl If You Love Me, 2023, is Dilworth's 22nd short film.

CREW WHO'S WHO

Frederica Nascimento

Scenic Designer

Works in theatre, film, and multidisciplinary design in the US and internationally. Being an architect informs her work with a focus on materiality, storytelling, and conceptual thinking, creating spaces and environments that are alive and empowered by collaboration. MFA in Scenic and Production Design for Film at NYU/TSOA; Scholar with Gulbenkian Foundation and FLAD; Member of the Portuguese Architects Association; Usual Suspect at New York Theatre Workshop; Faculty at LAPC; USA 829/IATSE. Frederica is a recipient of the LA Drama Critics Circle Award in Scenic Design. Resident Artist at A Noise Within. Recent design: *One Man Two Guvnors*, directed by Julia Rodriguez-Elliott and Geoff Elliott (ANW).
www.fredericanascimento.com IG: @fredericanascimentodesign

Gavan Wyrick

Lighting Designer

is an award winning lighting designer based out of Los Angeles. Open Fist: *The Bauhaus Project*, *Blood at the Root*, *Starmites*, *Anatomy of Gray*, *To The Bone*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Other credits include: *Ménage À Quatre* (LA LGBT Center); *A Going Away Party Play* (Boston Court); *Accommodation*, *Remembering the Future*, *God of Carnage* (The Odyssey); *Coney Island Land*, *Let Me In*, *Driver's Seat* (Theatre 68); *Hairspray*, *Oliver!*, *Oklahoma!*, *Damn Yankees*, *Fiddler on the Roof*, *Beauty and the Beast*, *South Pacific*, *A Funny Thing...Forum* (Desert Theatricals); *Joseph...Dreamcoat*, *Cinderella*, *Mary Poppins* (Performance Riverside). Web: gavanwyrickdesign.com; Instagram: @gavanwyrickdesign

A. Jeffrey Schoenberg

Costume Designer

is pleased to return to Open Fist Theatre, having designed many shows at including *Travesties*, *Threepenny Opera*, and *The Chekov Machine*. An award winning designer for theater, opera, and dance for more than 40 years, Jeffrey has designed for Shakespeare by the Sea, Antaeus Company, Will Geer Theatricum Botanicum and Colony Theater. A four-time Ovation award winner, he is the proud owner of AJS Costumes and Mr. Alan Jeffries Fine Gentlemen's Apparel.

CREW WHO'S WHO

Brad Bentz

Set Builder

Brad Bentz is a Los Angeles based Construction Coordinator, Technical Director, Designer and Actor. He has worked extensively in Los Angeles small theater most recently designing *Manage a Quarte* at the Renberg Theatre (Los Angeles - LGBTQ Center) and *Bat Boy the Musical* for Open Fist at Atwater Village Theater. He regularly designs and builds the 6th grade Musical for Village School in Palisades, and is the Technical Director for EST Theatre. Brad is glad to be bringing his skills and the skills of his talented team of scenics and carpenters to help make *Amerika* come to life on stage.

Nick Foran

Programmer

Originally from Australia, Nick is an award winning light and sound designer; working in LA since 2014. He is both resident designer and technical director at a range of theaters in Los Angeles including 24th St Theatre, Theatre 40 in Beverly Hills and he has also been the lighting and sound designer at the Stella Adler Academy of Acting since 2018. He's worked on several productions at Open Fist including *BOTH* and *First Look Fest*. He hopes you enjoy this incredible production.

MORE ON KAFKA

On Adapting Kafka

How does one adapt a story that has no ending?

Both *Amerika*, written near the beginning of Kafka's career, and *The Castle*, written near the end of his life, come to no final conclusion. The strands of the plots weave in too many (astounding) directions, the center cannot hold. In trying to say everything, they arrive at points that are (like life) unresolvable. Still, a dramatic performance cannot end in such a manner. A choice has to be made.

What you are going to see takes definite liberties, emphasizing certain aspects of the story, embellishing some while downplaying others, shaping the story to theatrical ends, and most audaciously (or impertinently for some) contriving an ending. Whether Kafka would have approved of these changes is anyone's guess.

When making his 1961 adaptation of *The Trial* (the one Kafka novel that reaches a conclusion), Orson Welles famously refused to film the original ending, in which Josef K allows himself to be executed with the shameful dying thought, "Like a dog". If he had lived through the Holocaust, Welles thought, Kafka would never have ended the story in such shocking surrender, and so instead Welles contrived a climax in which K defies his executioners, scaring them off so that they are forced to hurl back a bomb to accomplish the deed.

But I am not so sure that is indeed the choice Kafka would have made had he lived to adapt the work himself. (Indeed, that novel's ending was, along with its opening, the first part he wrote, and the inspiration for the story is thought to have been personal rather than political.) We can all individually conjecture, like Welles, but who can actually say? I only know that the Kafka who speaks to me personally is the one whose protagonists seesaw between defiance and passivity, courage and shame, sometimes with seeming randomness, and often in exact opposition to the action the moment requires. And I know I cannot be the only one who has at times found myself seesawing at crucial moments in a not dissimilar manner. It seems one of the conditions of being human. But I also know that this feeling may not be universal.

Still, one of the blessings of adaptation is that the book itself remains intact. The dissatisfied viewer can always go back to it, or read it for the first time. It is a stone tablet that adaptation cannot destroy. A testament that can be endlessly discussed and interpreted or even trashed, but whose words will long outlive their mangling.

Which is to say that there have been many adaptations of Kafka's works, including many adaptations of *Amerika*—this is merely one of them.

MORE ON KAFKA

"Kafka's Failure"

Review of *The Diaries of Franz Kafka*, editor Max Brod

It is curious that Max Brod should have felt it necessary to suppress certain passages in Kafka's diaries as "too intimate." What could be more "intimate" than *The Metamorphosis*, say, or *In the Penal Colony*? To admit authorship of these fantasies was to admit everything. If this does not seem obvious, it must be that we are still confused by the astonishing literalness and immediacy of Kafka's communication: not many writers have committed themselves to paper so fully, and yet this very fullness, this rigidly disciplined refusal of all concealment or evasion, is what most stands in one's way when one reads him for the first time. And doubtless it is this same quality that has called forth the clouds of Kafka exegesis, those dreary "interpretations" so hopelessly below the level of their subject—as though one burrowed into Kafka's profundities to escape the dreadful nakedness of his surface. Look once directly at that surface—not an easy thing to do, perhaps, with our insistence that every important work of art must conceal a usable doctrine—and one begins to see how much of Kafka's art is direct and shameless self-revelation.

It is, to be sure, a strange kind of self-revelation, entirely devoid of what for most men is the essential element of personal life: the details, what actually happened. But in this one case at least, the details really do not matter. Kafka gives us directly what the facts of his biography, however "intimate," could have revealed only indirectly; the "secret" Kafka labored so painfully to set down was not the content of his experience—how commonplace that was, after all—but its form. Thus: if he had conscientiously written the story of his engagement, it would have seemed that it was really possible for him to get married, just as he himself in the course of the engagement must have felt that it was possible; but he could not have written a story except on the assumption that marriage was not possible, and this assumption, even if it required a complete suppression of the facts, would have been correct. There is a perpetual discontinuity between Kafka and the world of other human beings (every "interpretation" is at bottom an attempt to conceal this), but the contours of his personality fit perfectly the contours of his art. In a sense, Kafka's personality is the final product of his art. The "real" Kafka is a certain way of writing (one might almost say: a certain kind of syntax).

Still, this is obviously more than the exact truth; that is, it is true only because he is dead and has become his books. While he still lived, there were always the "possibilities" of which he wrote so desperately ("...under what stone do they lie?")—he could not be absolutely sure they did not exist. (Perhaps Dora Dymant [Kafka's lover in the last year of his life] was a possibility realized.) The issue was never resolved except on the aesthetic level, and it remained to torment him at every moment in that half-life of the "normal" world which, even if he came to think of it (and rightly) as no life at all, was still in the most literal sense the life he had to lead. In this area of his existence, the details, such as they are, do have some relevance, and it is to this area that the diaries primarily belong. Kafka's fiction is from one point of view the record of his success; the diaries are the record of his failure, of the fragmentary and disjointed life that never came to anything.

Of Kafka one asks, not: what kind of man could have written these books?—but rather: how could the man who wrote these books have walked the streets? There is obviously no answer to such a question. And yet the diaries are relevant. If they bring us no closer to Kafka, they are of interest as one more element in what will never be a coherent picture; they give—as he puts it—"a kind of inkling of the way a life like this is constituted."

MORE ON KAFKA

It is surprising to find in the earlier passages, despite the constant recurrence of despair, a sort of common-sense hopefulness; Kafka has not yet come to realize that the "possibilities" will recede infinitely—perhaps, after all, there is only some temporary impediment keeping him from life. Even his drive to write seems still to fall within a recognizable framework: one can see him, at moments, as a young man with strong "literary aspirations." He is capable of banality: "If the French were German in their essence, then how the Germans would admire them!"—later, he will have no energy to spare for this kind of thing. He seeks people out, talks with them, observes, is attracted or not. ("There are still one or two houses in which I have something to do....") He becomes acquainted with a troupe of Yiddish actors visiting Prague and writes pages and pages about them, noting down the details of their appearance and mannerisms, the complicated plots of their plays, scraps of the Talmud; he becomes a close friend of the actor Löwy, falls in love with one of the actresses. The whole episode forms the brightest section of the diaries, and represents a sustained attempt on Kafka's part to circumvent his situation; in effect, it seems to have been an effort to entrap his father from behind, from the Jewish East—but, like all of Kafka's stratagems, it was conceived too far above the level of his enemy. (The father had this to say of his son's friendship with Löwy: "Whoever lies down with dogs gets up with fleas.") Apparently whatever important consequences the episode had were literary. And, thinking back over Kafka's account of it, one is not surprised that this should have been so: the brightness of the episode (like Kafka's personal "sociability," which still deceives Max Brod) is superficial—Kafka's concern with the actors remains fundamentally conceptual and lifeless, as if they belonged not to ordinary experience but to some stimulating intellectual regimen; all his detailed notations do not really evoke them as human beings.

This failure, not so much to understand other human beings as to experience their presence freely, can be seen throughout the diaries: they are peopled with wraiths; the discretion that leads Brod to identify so many of the chief characters by their initials is oddly appropriate. (In 1922, Kafka writes: "The gesture of rejection with which I was forever met did not mean: 'I do not love you,' but: 'You cannot love me.' . . . It is consequently incorrect to say that I have known the words, 'I love you'; I have known only the expectant stillness that should have been broken by my 'I love you,' that is all that I have known, nothing more.") Only in the travel notes, where Kafka can permit himself a relatively relaxed susceptibility to his surroundings, does one find the quality of "true" experience—for example, in a rather charming glimpse of Max Brod in Paris, young, "healthy," and slightly ridiculous. (It should be added that anyone would look ridiculous next to Kafka, once we have decided that it was not Kafka himself who was ridiculous.) In the diaries proper, the only really vivid portrait is of a lunatic, who obviously does not raise the problem of a personal relationship ("...how refreshing it is," Kafka writes, "to speak with a perfect fool").

But as Kafka records his personal failure—more and more desperately as time goes on—there is a corresponding effort towards success on the level of art, the only level where success was possible. The diaries offer only a glimpse of this struggle, in a certain number of fragments and false starts, but it is enough to give one a sense of how writing defined for Kafka the limits of his being. The man with "literary aspirations" disappears—indeed, as soon as one looks at him—and there emerges in his place a man whose existence is contained in a certain relationship to language, and for whom writing is as necessary as breathing but as painful as the breathing as one dying of tuberculosis. The least fragment of his art becomes a total assertion of his living presence, like the small movement with which the sick man announces that he is still there. If the personal failure was complete, the artistic success was, in a sense, absolute; one wonders, even, why anything more than fragments was necessary.

There is, certainly, a connection between the two levels of Kafka's existence—it can even be said that the connection is perfectly clear, that one cannot possibly miss it: one level is but the mirror image of the other—and yet it stretches across a gap of infinite dimensions. The failure and the success are not merely opposite "aspects" of Kafka's life: each is complete, each makes its own universe. Now and then we catch a glimpse of him making the leap from one to the other—for instance, when he writes, "This morning, for the first time in a long time, the joy again of imagining a knife twisted in my heart"—but even this tells us, not how the leap was made, but only that there was a leap.

ABOUT THE COMPANY...



Founded in 1990, the company chose the name Open Fist to represent its fierce determination to reach out and engage audiences with impactful work. From its inception, the company immediately established its reputation as a cutting-edge ensemble, willing to tackle difficult material. Under the present leadership of Artistic Director Martha Demson the company has evolved into a self-producing and ever-expanding artistic collective of actors, playwrights, designers and directors.

The company continues to thrive by telling diverse and intriguing stories. And unlike companies whose vision comes from one singular artist, Open Fist derives its voice from the full collaboration of its entire company. Rather than limit ourselves to one style or point of view, we choose to produce what we feel is most relevant and look to push the boundaries of theatrical experience. We pride ourselves on doing the things that are never seen in intimate theatre. Edgy, experimental, ambitious and bold are what you can expect to see in an Open Fist production. And with 35 years behind us, we're just getting started.

The Open Fist is an ALL VOLUNTEER Membership Company comprised of these wonderful artists:

*Amanda Weier, Amber Tiara, Barbara Bragg, Barbara Schofield,
Beth Robbins, Bethany Koulias, Bruce Dickinson, Bryan Bertone,
Carmella (Mel) Jenkins, Chima Rok, Christine Avila,
Christopher Cappiello, Christian Lebano, Clara York, David Shofner,
Debba Rofbeart, Delvin Harrington, Dylan Maddalena,
Ethan Remez-Cott, Grace Soens, Howard Leder, Hutchins Foster,
Ina Schumacher, Isaiah Abell, Jack Sharpe, James Fowler, Jan Munroe,
Jennifer Zorbalas, Judith Scarfone, Jeremy Thompson,
Kelsey Kusinitz, Lane Allison, Liz Kennedy, Maria Mastrojannis,
Martha Demson, Matthew Sullivan, Michael A. Shepperd,
Michaela Miller, Nemma Adeni, Pat Towne, Rosie Byrne, Sarah Zuk,
Schuyler Mastain, Syanne Green, Timothy Brown*

ABOUT THE COMPANY...



Want to help Open Fist
make more art?

Please consider making a tax
deductible donation via

Venmo @OpenFist or this QR code



Thank YOU for being one of the
'cool kids' who supports
LIVE theatre in L.A.

We LOVE you!

AI-proof authenticity from the
beginning.

SPECIAL THANKS

Sandra Willard
Ken Scarborough
Ellie Copeland
Patty Hume
Ben Shields

The Board & Members of the Open Fist Theatre for keeping art alive.

These beyond skilled folx who've contributed their time and talent:

CARPENTERS

Alex Hathaway
Josh Sampson
Spencer Reynaud
Justin Williams
Joe Davidson

SCENIC

Lead Scenic - Kristen Johansen
Kathryn Evans
Maggie Nelson
Forrest Scott
Aven Gonzalez
Karen Faulkner
Donna Wood

STAGE HANDS

Shaquille Hill
Rylan Boyle
Pat Towne

AND

Krys Fehervari for hair and make-up expertise.
Matt Richter for always going above and beyond for our community.
Jacob Carty for being an on-call Qlab genius.
Richard Bosman for the brilliant art.
George Caleodis for tickling the keys.
Bryan Swartz for trumpet lesson love.
Warner Bros & Bruce Dickinson for propping us up.
Maren & Steven Stinson for the German.