

by **TRAVIS MICHAEL HOLDER**

Amerika or, The Man who Disappeared

Open Fist Theatre Company and Circle X Theatre

In my early teen years, I definitely crashed past the usual youthful interests in homecoming dances and status seeking as warp-speed, instead embracing my darker, more aesthetically morbid side; had I been born later, I'm sure I would have been referred to as Goth. By 14, I was soaking up Kerouac, Genet, Sartre, Nathanael West, and certainly Franz Kafka. Why, I was one dream away from turning into a cockroach myself.

I had an especially powerful connection to Kafka's *Amerika or, The Man Who Disappeared*, which told the convoluted and somewhat dystopian tale of Karl Rossmann, a 17-year-old German immigrant in the early 20th century sent packing to the New World after he knocked up his nanny—and for anyone who knows my own personal history or gleaned my past from my "auto-novel" *Waiting for Walk*, it shouldn't be hard to see the parallels.

Told with Kafka's familiar electrifying edge of wandering into the surreal, I identified greatly with poor Karl. I too felt as though I had in a way been sent away to fend for myself early on since I was hardly the typical example of the perfect midwestern suburban teenager being constantly asked by adults what I wanted to do with my life. That I knew—and no one who heard my answer was terribly happy about it.

Karl was forced in *Amerika* to face a ridiculous barrage of challenges in his young life, which to me always seemed an insurmountable series of events for anyone to try to adapt the work for the stage.

Writer/producer/editor of children's programming Dietrich Smith has done just that—and the result is monumental. His adaptation of *Amerika*, now returned to the Open Fist after an initial run there last fall, is nothing short of epic. It's a sprawling, extremely respectful homage to Kafka, who envisioned a future for our species 100-plus years ago that frighteningly doesn't seem too far from the truth at this particular place in time.

With the help of an astoundingly innovative and unstoppably visionary design team, Smith has proven that, with a lot of brash confidence and a buttload of imagination, intimate theatre doesn't need to be all painted black cubes and recycled Goodwill couches.

On Frederica Nascimento's Caligari-like set made up of levels and platforms and modular cubbyholes stuffed with model sailing ships and steampunk gears and bolts, poor Karl (played by transplanted South African disciplinary artist Oqalile Tshetshe in what must be an astronomically exhausting LA professional stage debut) wanders through each and every period Kafka thrusts him into headfirst.

In the production's nearly three-and-a-half hour, two intermission-worthy running time, our young hero bounces from the steerage bowels of a massive ship to the Manhattan mansion of his industrialist uncle (a juicy turn from the always-sturdy Pat Towne) to wandering the open roads with a pair of untrustworthy opportunistic also European-transplanted wags (Elliott Moore and Matthew Goodrich) to being taken in by a goodhearted hotel restaurant manager (Maria Mastroyannis) and given a job running one of the facility's many elevators.

From there, after being railroaded by an outrageous accusation, Karl faces possible jail time and is eventually thrust into *Amerika's* most out-there location: a bizarrely freakish theatre company that may be located in the afterlife or just may have something to do with Oklahoma.

I always saw the final chapter of Karl's journey as something unearthly—especially since it occurs after he chooses to take a swan dive from a third floor balcony. In Smith's adaptation, the entrance to the Theatre of Oklahoma is populated, as it is in the novel, with angels blowing trumpets to welcome prospective castmembers, but somehow in translation, many of the more magical aspects of the story are blurred and some of the more surreal touchstones that made the story on the page so mystical get lost in the stagecraft.

I'm not saying anything here should be eliminated or condensed—although I do think that there should be a published warning, especially for members of the scrutinizing press, of the production's Homeric running time—but I do wonder if the playwright should have stepped away and let someone direct who was less personally embroiled in seeing his longtime dream come to fruition.

Aside from perhaps needing someone less involved with a fresh perspective to take the reins, Smith also appears to have focused so completely on the story and the implementation of the design facets of his passion project that the actors have suffered being ignored.

The acting, although occasionally noteworthy—particularly Towne, Mastroyannis, Jade Santana in a hilarious quickie as a somnambulant Italian elevator boy, and Jeremy D. Thompson in a rich variety of eclectic characters—is in general a mixed bag. Seldom are performers working in the same playing style or even at the same volume, things that hurt the production immensely.

Still, the aforementioned stagecraft is worth any misses, from A. Jeffrey Schoenberg's meticulous period costuming to seven-time Oscar winning Gary Rydstrom's redolent and often echoing soundscape to Gavan Wyrick's suggestive art deco-tinged lighting which so sumptuously bathes Nascimento's highly versatile set in wild geometric light.

And then there's Elizabeth Moore's striking huge paintings on drops depicting New York City and every other location along Karl's travels and the whimsical, comic book-like projections designed by legendary *Courage the Cowardly Dog* creator John R. Dilworth that take this *Amerika* to a wonderful new level, bringing out some of the novel's welcome comedic aspects that the performances often miss.

Whatever the misses are here, the overall effort is quite remarkable. Smith's adaptation finds all the sly Kafkaesque complexities and colors that, as in the source material, are camouflaged by the narrative: the eternal battle between the haves and the have-nots, the shabby treatment of individuals deemed lesser than others, and the search for a reason to be alive in our puzzling and too-often apathetic society.

Amerika or, *The Man who Disappeared* was one of Kafka's earliest novels, written when he was in his late 20s and without its author ever having stepped foot in America. It remained unpublished until after his untimely death at age 40 and was unleashed into print against his fervent wish that it never would be made public.

Dietrich Smith has done an incredible job transforming *Amerika* for the stage. To me, breathing life into a classic antagonist whose doomed search for personal identity and the rapidly disintegrating American Dream in an uncaring world is far more interesting and relatable than anything Arthur Miller ever imagined.

THROUGH MAY 3: Atwater Village Theatre, 3269 Casitas Av., LA. Tickets: openfist.org or circlextheatre.org