

Steven Berkoff's *Metamorphosis*:
Total Theatre and Self-Reflexivity

Robert Cross

Everything in Kafka is a theatrical
representation of life!

Jean-Louis Barrault

In a post-1945 world collectively traumatised by the experiences of Auschwitz and Hiroshima, and emptier than ever before, many would argue, of moral and spiritual cohesion, the writings of Franz Kafka continue to express the uncertainties and sudden brutalities of human existence, and lay bare the late-twentieth-century angst-ridden psyche. His influence upon the art of this century, particularly in the West, has been so profound that it extends far beyond the confines of literature proper.

With regard to Kafka's impact upon modern Western experimental theatre, Polish scholar Jan Kott has observed that:

I have often wondered which writers have most influenced the contemporary theatre in its three main directions: the theatre of the absurd, the theatre of cruelty, and the happening. To my mind it has only very recently been possible to attempt a reply to this question. One could not imagine this revolution in drama occurring without Kafka and Joyce . . . *Ulysses* and *The Trial* are in a sense books dealing with the whole of existence.¹

What lies behind Kott's assertion is almost certainly the fact that Kafka's

writings not only convey an absurdist/existentialist world-view entirely expressive of modern sensibilities, but that his fiction in itself is also thoroughly *dramatic* in quality, as Martin Esslin has recognised with his assertion that:

. . . even if Kafka's own modest attempt to write a play came to nothing, the directness of his narrative prose, the concrete clarity of its images and its mystery and tensions, have proved a constant temptation to adapters who felt that it was ideal material for the stage.²

One reason for this is the fact that, conversely, Kafka's writing was strongly influenced by the theatre, in particular the Yiddish theatre.³

Since the Second World War, adaptations, both dramatic and cinematic, of Kafka's stories, novels and diaries have proliferated, as each subsequent post-1945 generation has found its own meaning reflected in his works.⁴ Within contemporary British theatre nobody has made greater use of Kafka's writings in the creation of a theatrical *oeuvre* than the London-born Jewish actor, writer, director, and playwright Steven Berkoff (b. 1936). Berkoff's dramatic adaptations of Kafka's works to date have been the following: *In the Penal Colony* (Arts Lab, 1968), *Metamorphosis* (The Round House, 1969), *Knock at the Manor Gate* (Sussex University, 1972) and *The Trial* (The Round House, 1973). Of these, only *Knock at the Manor Gate* remains unpublished.⁵ The focus of this paper will be upon his adaptation of *The Metamorphosis*.

In common with many other adapters, Berkoff was attracted by the dramatic quality of Kafka's writings: "I'd turned to Kafka for the adaptations because, like [Orson] Welles and [Jean-Louis] Barrault, I was fascinated by the sheer theatricality of his imagination."⁶ And indeed, Barrault and Welles had demonstrated to Berkoff the potential of Kafka's works as a source of dramatic material with their adaptations of *The Trial*: the 1947 stage version

(*Le Procès*) and the 1963 film (*The Trial*) respectively. A thorough treatment of these two adaptations does not fall within the scope of this paper. Nevertheless, in order to appreciate Berkoff's own individual approach to Kafka's works, a brief consideration will be made of the manner in which both Barrault/Gide and Welles interpreted the novel.

As a young actor in repertory during the early 1960s, frustrated with what he saw as the dull realism of British mainstream theatre, Berkoff used his frequent 'resting' periods to study and search for new theatrical alternatives: "In those great acres of time an actor spends unemployed I began to study mime and then I used to go to libraries and read and read until I found something I thought might work for me."⁷ One tremendously important discovery made by Berkoff during these private researches were the English translations of Barrault's theatrical memoirs, *Reflections on the Theatre* (1951) and *The Theatre of Jean-Louis Barrault* (1961). It was in the second of these two works that Berkoff read and became deeply inspired by Barrault's account of his re-working, with Gide, of *The Trial*. With that production they became the first adapters to exploit this "ideal material," making of Kafka's novel an allegory of the German occupation of France.

Similarly, the American director Orson Welles interpreted *The Trial* politically, creating a Cold War scenario in which the modern individual, represented by Josef K., is threatened and destroyed by a grey Stalinist-type bureaucracy. Welles, according to one commentator,

. . . has made the story more active by eliminating some of its spiritual and philosophical implications. Welles's version of *The Trial* is essentially about a man hounded and destroyed by a dehumanized totalitarian state.

Welles's film has a material, factual ring to it. K's

misadventures are taken literally: he is arrested by sinister authorities, interrogated, toyed with by officials and “advocates,” and finally murdered by two thugs. The book’s metaphysical uncertainties, its intimations that *The Trial* could be a paranoid fantasy, or a spiritual test, or an extended and very black joke, find little place in the film.⁸

Thus the common feature of these two stylistically quite different adaptations is their shared politico-historical interpretation. They have both, in the words of Peter Lev, “been transformed by the experience of World War II.”⁹ In stark contrast to these adaptations, Berkoff’s own dramatisations have focused without exception upon the inner life of the individual: “I think Kafka had an immense imagination which dealt with the unconscious side of ourselves or the dreamlike side of ourselves.”¹⁰ It is understandable, therefore, that Berkoff has resisted interpreting Kafka’s fiction in any overtly political way, being concerned rather with the individual, which is to say with presenting and exploring himself, or at least, as will be demonstrated below, his publicly re-created self.

Such was the impact of Barrault’s writings upon Berkoff that as early as in 1962 he purchased the performance rights of the Barrault/Gide adaptation of *The Trial* with the intention of staging it in London with an experimental group he had formed with his friend John Dunhill. That particular project never reached fruition, however, and before finally presenting his own adaptation of *The Trial* in 1973, Berkoff would create the dramatisations of other works by Kafka noted above. As was mentioned before, the scope of this paper will be limited to a discussion of *Metamorphosis*. Specifically, it will be argued that the dramaturgical aesthetics of this adaptation and its *mise-en-scène* have been informed by Berkoff’s attempt to marry together two

primary concerns: first, the creation of total theatre; and second, the public presentation of what shall be referred to as the 'Berkoff-persona.' Before proceeding further, it is necessary to define what will be understood here by these two terms.

Total theatre is a term that tends to arouse some confusion since it may be applied to an astonishing array of quite different theatrical traditions, styles and phenomena. E. T. Kirby's seminal edition *Total Theatre: A Critical Anthology* (1969) includes not only primary texts by Wagner, Appia, Craig, Claudel and Barrault, but also essays on Meyerhold, Reinhardt, Piscator, Elizabethan theatre, and even Kabuki and the classic Chinese theatre. Total theatre, therefore, unless qualified, remains a rather amorphous term. In this paper, it will be understood in its twentieth century French manifestation, and reference will be made, therefore, to 'French total theatre'. Christopher Innes's very useful historical perspective of the tradition clarifies the term further:

The search for 'totality' in one form or another was one of the major motifs in French theatre between the wars. From Barrault the line runs back not only to Artaud with his concept of a theatre that could totally involve the audience, both physically and emotionally: it can also be traced through Charles Dullin, Barrault's first mentor, . . . to the symbolists, and to Copeau's Vieux Colombier, where Dullin received his training. Copeau united a visual stylization derived from Gordon Craig with Adolphe Appia's concepts of rhythmic movement, sculptural lighting and 'musical space' in which actor and setting are united in a single plastic and expressive image . . .¹¹

It was from key figures belonging to this French total theatre movement

that Berkoff developed his dramaturgy, having read the theories and memoirs of Artaud and Barrault respectively, and studied mime and physical performance skills at the École Jacques Lecoq in Paris in 1965-66. In a similar fashion to British director Peter Brook, who, with the encouragement of Barrault, chose to base himself in Paris rather than in Britain, one would be justified in locating Berkoff philosophically within this French tradition of physical theatre rather than within any British framework. Indeed, as will be seen below, Berkoff has used the principles of French total theatre to attack a British theatre Establishment that, in his view, concerns itself with lifeless naturalism,¹² and has consistently ignored his own—again, in his view—prodigious talent. Berkoff has thus used total theatre as a tool and a weapon in his struggle for artistic independence.

A further motivating force in most of Berkoff's work has been his desire to re-create himself and present this new 'self', so to speak, in the public arena not merely as the sub-text of his dramatic works, but as an integral part of the art-work. This is particularly so, as will be seen below, in the case of *Metamorphosis*. One might even go so far as to assert that his public self-presentation *is* the drama. In this sense, the creation of theatre becomes for Berkoff a self-reflexive act, involving the presentation of himself—in both senses of the word—to his audience. Thus Berkoff's individual performance—in the case of *Metamorphosis*, in the leading role as the man-beetle Gregor Samsa—becomes an overwhelmingly self-reflexive discourse.

Regarding the concept of self-reflexivity it is helpful, before proceeding further, to consider the observation made by one prominent theatre semiotician that:

The performer is always to some degree opaque, putting his very histrionic strategies on show as an index of his own virtuosity.[. . .]

A well-known actor will bring to his performance, moreover, an 'intertextual' history which invites the spectator to compare it with past performances, thus drawing attention to the performer's ideolectal traits (common to all his performances). It would be vain to exclude these extra-textual factors as incidental or non-semiotic considerations: not infrequently the primary 'meaning' of a given representation for its audience is the very presence of a favourite performer (i. e. the performance text becomes the 'vehicle' for the actor rather than vice versa).¹³

It will be argued here that Berkoff, in the privileged position of being not only the writer and director of his dramas but also frequently the leading actor in them, brings a considerable 'intertextual' history to bear upon each performance. This meta-theatrical history is what we shall refer to as the 'Berkoff-persona'.

Briefly, the 'Berkoff-persona' will be understood here as an elaborate image of himself, created by Berkoff for public consumption, and which is informed by the combination of three mutually influencing aspects of himself. Firstly, there is a 'social Berkoff': the individual who was born in London in 1936, and the facts of whose real life may be verified objectively. Secondly, there is a 'theatrical Berkoff': the actor, mime, director, and writer who has adapted and re-created himself according to the dictates of his career and professional environment. This is the aspect of the man who may become histrionic during interviews because it is somehow expected of him, and so forth. Thirdly, there is a 'fictional Berkoff', the projection of himself in a given drama through the performance of an *alter ego*, which in the case of *Metamorphosis*, of course, is Gregor Samsa. It is these elements which together contribute to the creation of the 'Berkoff-persona'. Yet it must be

stressed immediately that this persona is in no sense a fixed and unchanging entity. Rather, depending upon the drama in question, the 'Berkoff-persona' may display varying and apparently contradictory qualities. In a later play, *East* (1975), Berkoff draws upon his own experiences of growing up in the tough working-class East End neighbourhood of London. In this case, Berkoff's *alter ego* is the extravert figure of Mike, a juvenile delinquent who finds anarchic release in sex and violence. Berkoff identifies his persona here with the untameable *joie de vivre* of Mike's youthful rebellion. With regard to *Metamorphosis*, however, Berkoff displays a wide spectrum of perceptions about himself, encompassing not only self-hatred but also self-love, both key aspects, it will be argued below, of Berkoff's presentation of his Janus-faced persona. In this context, when asked by one interviewer whether he liked himself, Berkoff confessed, significantly, that:

Well, we all have periods of self loathing. We are divided selves. And we get schizophrenic when the two worlds drift away from each other. Yes, I love myself. I think I am wonderful, I am amazed at how wonderful I am . . .

And at other times I am full of self loathing and think, 'Oh my God, what have I achieved? How pathetic I am! A few scribbly words, and look at me! I'm an old man who still behaves like a teenage delinquent, and how insecure and socially inadequate I am, and what a limited range of friends and loves I have'. I sometimes feel so depressed I am ready to end it all.¹⁴

Paradoxically, therefore, Berkoff's self-hatred is expressed through an act of self-love. His 'total' public portrayal of himself is the last resort of an individual who has constantly desired and has yet been denied recognition and acceptance; it is a final appeal for love, springing, in the final analysis, from

formidable reserves of self-belief and self-love.

Within Berkoff's *oeuvre*, *Metamorphosis* is an immensely important work; at once a performance manifesto and a vehicle for his public self-revelation. In the words of one theatre scholar, it is "the finest flowering and most perfect articulation of Berkoff's notions of theatre."¹⁵ In a piece entitled "Twenty Years of *Metamorphosis*" (1989), Berkoff reflects with evident satisfaction on the longevity and success of this adaptation, and describes the time when he first staged it in 1969 as "the most unforgettable of my life and the most exhausting"¹⁶; a measure, therefore, of its significance for him, and of his personal commitment in particular to that original production. Furthermore, in his book, *Meditations on Metamorphosis* (1995), Berkoff reviews his experiences of directing ten separate productions of the play in various languages and continents during the years 1969-92, culminating in the 1992 Japanese-language production at the Mitsubishi Theatre in Tokyo. In that book Berkoff states that: "What it did for me was to allow me the scope to explore, experiment and extend my vision and, finally, to be responsible for my own creation."¹⁷

Berkoff's first encounter with Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* (as a teenager in the library of an American military base in Germany) resulted in a strong sense of kinship and affinity with the writer, as he explains:

I was exploring the shelves when I came across this strange-sounding name and was drawn to it. Kafka. Now what on earth was that? I took out *Metamorphosis and Other Stories*. The curious thing was that nobody introduced me to Kafka. I discovered him by accident, as if led to him by some metaphysical agent. These were simply beautifully written tales with which I identified and found myself in accordance, though for what reason I could not

quite fathom. Perhaps it was the innate simplicity of recording the nervous system of the human beast.¹⁸

Even before thoughts of entering the theatrical profession and adapting Kafka's stories had suggested themselves to him, therefore, Berkoff had found himself drawn to this story for two reasons. Firstly, Berkoff saw the dynamics of his own family reflected in the Samsa, and by extension, the Kafka families¹⁹; secondly, the story's theme of alienation and isolation spoke directly to Berkoff's own self-doubts during his directionless days prior to commencing drama studies.²⁰ Thus one might say that Berkoff had already 'become' Gregor Samsa. Later, as an unemployed actor, he would see himself in that role again, as he vainly sought recognition from his ersatz family, the theatre world. Thus at different stages in his life, both as a disaffected lonely teenager and later, as a working-class Jewish outsider in a bourgeois theatre world, Berkoff understood *The Metamorphosis* as a singularly appropriate expression of his own situation. Furthermore, there can be little doubt that Berkoff had been further encouraged in his identification with Kafka by Barrault's description of his strong personal relationship with the Czech writer and his *alter ego* Joseph K:

I have previously said that for a long time I have loved Kafka like an elder brother; Joseph K.'s indignation, his cunning or failings, his candour and obstinacy for individual freedom found echoes within myself.²¹

Compare that with Berkoff's own later recognition, to be found in his introduction to the published text of his adaptation of *The Trial*, that:

Kafka expressed me as I expressed Kafka. His words stung and hung on my brain, infused themselves in my art and were regurgitated in my work. . . . Joseph K's mediocrity was mine and

his ordinariness and fears were mine too: the 'under-hero' struggling to find the ego that would lead him to salvation.²²

It was Barrault's example once again that would reveal the full dramatic potential of *The Metamorphosis* to Berkoff. In *Reflections on the Theatre*, Berkoff read Barrault's account of his first attempt to create a drama employing what he called 'subjective mime'.²³ In his final year (1934-5) at Le Théâtre de l'Atelier in Paris, the young Barrault read William Faulkner's novel *As I Lay Dying*, recalling that: "That was a real 'encounter', and I am quite sure that it was the only book I read that year . . . The book absorbed me and in my turn I put all my energies into absorbing it."²⁴ It was the opportunity for miming what he had conceived as a centaur-type figure that attracted Barrault to produce and perform his own adaptation entitled *Autour d'une Mère*. Similarly, *Metamorphosis* is built around the mimed actions of the man-beetle Gregor Samsa, and in embarking upon this endeavour, Berkoff acknowledged the direct influence of his mentor: "Jean-Louis Barrault's description of his struggle to create a horse in *As I Lay Dying* gave me the confidence to plunge in."²⁵

Following on from his first drama, the adaptation of Kafka's "In the Penal Colony," *Metamorphosis* represented for Berkoff a further step along the path of establishing his independence, a second act of defiance towards a theatre Establishment that had chosen largely to ignore him. Indeed, the very title of the story/play, as Berkoff himself has pointed out, is laden with telling personal significance:

My metamorphosis [*sic*] was *my metamorphosis* from common under-employed actor to entrepreneur, director, actor, writer, mime, all rolled into one fist - one giant ball that would shatter the plate-glass window of British theatre.²⁶

It is in this specific sense alone that Berkoff may be seen as a political animal, declaring and preserving his personal artistic freedom, integrity, and creativity on nobody's terms but his own, and certainly not those of the theatre Establishment. Looking back at that time, Berkoff has recalled, once again in a similar fashion to Barrault, that:

I chose *Metamorphosis* by Franz Kafka as a means of defining who I was as an actor and director. I wanted to exercise the possibility of an actor being stretched beyond the pale of naturalism and to create theatre that was truly theatrical, that penetrated beneath the surface of human activity with its simple human conflicts and ego-bound convention that obsesses most playwrights.²⁷

Beyond this struggle of an individual against the *status quo* there are no overt political messages to be understood from Berkoff's act, since he has never taken up the cudgels on anyone else's account but his own, nor has he broadened the front of his attack to embrace larger issues. It was strictly a case of Berkoff versus the British theatre Establishment in the promotion of his career.

His challenge was delivered, appropriately enough, in the guise of a beetle (Berkoff as lowly unemployed Jewish actor) imprisoned on stage in a cage-like structure (the bourgeois theatrical profession), and rejected and reviled by those very people from whom he should have expected support: his family and colleagues (fellow theatre professionals). Thus Berkoff aligned himself not only with Gregor Samsa the oppressed son but also with Gregor Samsa the oppressed salesman, taking the struggles of the central character as a metaphor for his own early years in the commercial theatre, as he scurried like a dung-beetle looking for work as an actor.

At this point it is important to emphasise that Berkoff identified himself

with Gregor Samsa's struggle and sense of being a victim but most emphatically not with his ultimate death and defeat. Berkoff's irrepressible self-confidence is evident in his presentation of himself, like Barrault, as a master of physical performance. If the play's setting is dominated by a cage-like structure that drastically reduces Gregor's scope for free movement, then Berkoff exploited precisely that spacial limitation to demonstrate what he could nonetheless achieve through the medium of physical theatre. With *Metamorphosis*, therefore, Berkoff thematises his own overcoming of the restrictions placed upon him by the theatre Establishment:

I was younger then and still living off the soup of frustration deep in my craw. I had created the whole production, but the motive behind it all, the driving force, had been my desire to show this monster/creature/human and express the versatility that conventional theatre could never accommodate. I wanted to demonstrate the ideas that are open to us when we eschew the plaintive whine of naturalism . . .²⁸

Escape from the 'cage' of naturalism could only be achieved through total theatre. And in a neat reversal, Berkoff has argued that rather than Gregor (i. e., Berkoff himself) it is in fact Gregor's bourgeois family (i. e., the commercial theatre) that is restricted and 'imprisoned':

The family, living in fear of time and money, sometimes became animated marionettes that moved, reflecting the insect's movements, so that they as a group, more than Gregor, were the dung beetle in reality. They were the creature, with their obsessive collecting of their balls of dung—their small, paltry, bourgeois achievements.²⁹

In comparison with *In the Penal Colony*, Berkoff's approach to the writing

of this second script demonstrated a great leap forward in artistic self-confidence and self-belief. With regard to the writing of the earlier play, Berkoff's approach, he admits himself, had been uncomplicated and cautious:

I chose to adapt the story and stick faithfully to the text since it contains the drama and unfolds very carefully, building the tension only gradually. There was little to do except put Kafka's words in the mouths of the characters since there is probably more dialogue here than is usual in his stories.³⁰

Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*, however, with its reliance upon third-person narrative, was an altogether more ambitious undertaking than the spare and dialogue-based story of the penal colony and its terrifying torture machine. Berkoff used the English translation by Willa and Edwin Muir as his source text, and, except for some minor changes and alterations to the sequencing, conformed to the plot and dialogue of the original very closely. In the case of *In the Penal Colony* Berkoff had, by closely following Kafka's text, created a scenario that would, on the stage, become top-heavy with his own dominant performance as the sadistic officer. The script for *Metamorphosis*, on the other hand, was written by Berkoff with the express purpose of exploring the notion, learned at Jacques Lecoq's mime school in Paris, of an organic ensemble against which he could foreground his own solo performance as Gregor.³¹ Thus one considerable change in the adaptation, as Berkoff explains, was the shift of perspective from Gregor to the members of the family:

Having created my family, for whom Gregor is the only topic of conversation, I started, like a painter, to bring them to life and add colour and shape. Gregor was seen through their eyes and they brought him to life by acting as a chorus for him, speaking about his needs—'What's he doing now?' Gregor in turn would speak

about them, twisting in guilt for his failure to accommodate and provide for them. Kafka's story is told from Gregor's room . . . I simply reversed this process and had the bulk of the story told via the family.³²

This approach may be clearly observed, for example, by considering Berkoff's treatment of the opening of the story. Kafka's text, in the Muir translation, begins thus:

As Gregor Samsa awoke one morning from uneasy dreams he found himself transformed in his bed into a gigantic insect. He was lying on his hard, as it were armour-plated, back and when he lifted his head a little he could see his dome-like brown belly divided into stiff arched segments on top of which the bed-quilt could hardly keep in position and was about to slide off completely. His numerous legs, which were pitifully thin compared to the rest of his bulk, waved helplessly before his eyes.

What has happened to me? he thought. It was no dream.³³

If one compares this now with the opening of Berkoff's adaptation, it is apparent how both the perspective and the distribution of words among the various characters have undergone a considerable change, placing a far greater burden upon the other characters:

As each speaks they [Gregor and the three members of his family—my note] form a line behind each other. On the last line they take on the movement of an insect by moving their arms to a particular rhythm. As no front lighting is used, this has the effect of an insect's leg movements.

MR. S: [*enters*] As Gregor Samsa awoke one morning from uneasy

dreams . . .

MRS. S: [*enters*] He found himself transformed in his bed into a gigantic insect . . .

GRETA: [*enters*] His numerous legs, which were pitifully thin compared to the rest of his bulk, waved helplessly before him.

[*Movement starts. GREGOR is in front. Suddenly the movement stops. FAMILY dissolve the beetle image by moving away—leaving GREGOR still moving as part of the insect image.*]

GREGOR: What has happened to me?

FAMILY: He thought.

GREGOR: It was no dream.³⁴

The function of the ensemble, however, was not merely to bring the character of Gregor to theatrical life: the heavily stylised choreography of the other performers also served to create the very environment of the play. In the first place, as Berkoff explains, this meant establishing the psychological dynamics of the Samsa household:

. . . I chose to adapt/direct the play as formally as possible suggesting the family's joy/anguish very often in fixed attitudes—choreographed reactions—Victorian gestures, frozen movement became an analogue to the hard, bright, mechanical insect movement of Gregor—they might be separate units of the beetle themselves.³⁵

Secondly, the minimalistic setting (three stools and the cage structure) required the performers to mime everything, thus the ensemble had also to create the entire physical environment of the drama. Berkoff explains, for

example, that: "We saw them at breakfast as if the whole front of the stage was a giant long table, but it didn't exist, of course, and they were able to create all the aspects of domestic life from the three stools."³⁶ This mime-based approach, first seen in his work in *Metamorphosis*, has subsequently become a hallmark of his *mises-en-scène*, the very foundation of the Berkovian style.

Although *Metamorphosis* requires an ensemble performance, the focus throughout the play is nonetheless on Gregor, whose room and permitted sphere of activity, represented by the metal cage structure, is the visual core of the setting. "The family," Berkoff explains, "were placed so as to be able to function without masking Gregor from the audience."³⁷ Since Berkoff played the role of the man-beetle himself in the first production, the focus was necessarily upon himself, literally over and above the ensemble on a raised platform, as he has explained:

The geometric shape of the insect governed my movements, for not only must one find the animal, but the animal *is the mise en scène*, the production. The insect must be seen, so should always be hovering, always watching the family."³⁸

The original production clearly hinged on Berkoff's own performance as the man-insect, thus one may see that his assertion that "the animal *is the mise-en-scène*" easily becomes indistinguishable from "*Berkoff is the mise-en-scène*". In this sense, and in a similar manner to Barrault, Berkoff was using the role of Gregor in *Metamorphosis* to showcase his own mime and physical performance skills. He has described his objectives, in terms reminiscent of Barrault's notion of 'subjective mime', in the following way:

I played it as a human being locked within the carapace of the beetle, and I physically attempted to enact the rhythms of an insect

and its frenetic scurrying movements. The use of mime made this possible, and I made myself feel trapped, bound to the floor on my belly. You can only make the audience believe what you yourself believe, that you are a human being trapped in the worst possible situation, caught at the moment of crisis that contains the greatest element of tragedy.³⁹

Beyond the influence of Barrault and Jacques Lecoq, there are also signs of the ideas of another proponent of French total theatre, Antonin Artaud, in this adaptation and its *mise-en-scène*.⁴⁰ There is little doubt, for example, that in the extremity and commitment of his own performance Berkoff saw himself as the quintessential Artaudian sacrificial actor, “signalling through the flames”⁴¹ to the audience:

The human Samsa stands spiritually naked in his insect form. No human conventions shield him from the emotional tensions of the family—father, mother and sister. He has dropped the human mask and they must take him as he is.⁴²

And elsewhere he has written that: “. . . Gregor’s beetle metamorphosis is an attitude deliberately taken to expressively show his inner-state, his naked dehumanized personality, a struggling insect, . . .”⁴³ To this end, Berkoff’s individual performance literally becomes a physical self-sacrifice, an Artaudian oblation fraught with danger:

I, at one stage, had to climb and drop my body, hanging just by my legs and ankles, afraid nightly of being killed, but willing it, in my fanatic desire to outdo everyone else, my own self and my fears.⁴⁴

Thus it is possible to view *Metamorphosis* as an application by Berkoff of Artaud’s theatrical principles to the raw material of Kafka’s story, a cross-fertilisation between two of the most crucially important influences upon him

fertilisation and his work.

Berkoff's performance as Gregor, as was briefly noted above, is informed by a mixture of negative and positive self-perceptions. On the one hand, Berkoff's self-hate manifests itself here in his identification with the stereotype of the angst-ridden Jewish outsider⁴⁵; his self-love, on the other hand, is evident in his presentation of himself as the consummate physical performer, thumbing his nose at the theatre Establishment. Thus one witnesses Berkoff overcoming his self-hatred, with his publicly recreated self rising phoenix-like, as it were, from the ashes of the defeated Gregor Samsa. This conclusion is underlined by Berkoff's less than modest statement in the introductory notes to the published text of the play that:

Gregor as a bug is a hero of huge proportions: he snarls, he spits, leaps out of the family, meditates profoundly on the loss of human structure and emotions. A bug. Damned, filthy, loathsome thing in the back room. Introvert, artist, Jew, writer—therefore a bug. Berkoff, on reading this, could see in it the Theatre of the Impossible, as Kafka's stories are the legends of the impossible. Who in the world has the resources, the higher flights of the absurdist imagination but the surreal magician, Berkoff—actor/writer/director/novelist [*sic*] and ex-menswear salesman from Stepney?⁴⁶

To conclude, then, we have seen how the aesthetics of this play have been shaped by Berkoff's need to satisfy two objectives: the creation of a total theatre production style, on the one hand, and a self-reflexive discourse, on the other. In other words, Berkoff created a *mise-en-scène* that permitted him to present not only the drama entitled *Metamorphosis* as a statement of his dramaturgical principles but also the notorious 'Berkoff-persona', the self-

hating, self-loving, Jewish, proletarian outsider who is also a physical performance artist entirely aware of his own considerable talents. Thus one may speak of a twin product, a double-edged weapon deployed by Berkoff in his challenge to the theatrical *status quo* and in the promotion of his own multi-faceted career. In almost all his plays subsequent to this adaptation, with the clear exception of the politically motivated *Sink the Belgrano!* (1986), Berkoff has followed a similar approach of combining dramaturgical concerns—creating total theatre—with the presentation of certain aspects of his ‘Berkoff-persona’. This has been most noticeably the case with more personal dramas such as *The Trial* (1973), *East* (1976), *Greek* (1980), *Harry's Christmas* (1985) *Acapulco* (1986) and *Kvetch* (1986), in each of which there is a clearly identifiable Berkoff *alter ego*. The great significance of *Metamorphosis* resides in the fact that this was Berkoff's first articulation of these dual preoccupations.

Notes

- 1 Jan Kott, “Strange Thoughts about Kafka.” Chap. in *Theatre Notebook: 1947-1967* (New York: Doubleday, 1968), 260-1.
- 2 Martin Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1991), 355.
- 3 The dramatic quality of Kafka's fiction has been analysed by James Rolleston in *Kafka's Narrative Theater* (University Park & London: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1974) and Kurt Klinger in “Kafka auf der Bühne.” (*Newsletter of the Kafka Society America*, No. 1, June 1983, 56-70). For the question of the specific influence of the Yiddish theatre upon Kafka, see Evelyn Torton Beck's *Kafka and the Yiddish Theater: Its Impact on his Work* (Madison: Wisconsin University Press, 1971). For an analysis of the theatrical qualities of *The Metamorphosis*, readers are directed to Elisabeth Kiefer's article “Theaterspuren in Kafkas Werk: Eine Analyse der Erzählung ‘Die Verwandlung’ im Hinblick auf ihre theatralen Elemente.” *Neophilologus* 73 (1989), Nr. 2, 263-80.
- 4 It does not fall within the scope of this paper to attempt a comprehensive historical account of the many adaptations of Kafka's works that have been

undertaken. For a tolerably complete compilation of the scores of adaptations which appeared in various languages up to 1979, including mention of all Berkoff's dramatic re-workings, see the first section (Dramatisierungen und Verfilmungen) of Heinke Wunderlich's chapter entitled "Kafka-Texte als Ausgangspunkt für andere Kunstschöpfungen" in Hartmut Binder (ed.), *Kafka-Handbuch in zwei Bänden*, Bd. 2: *Das Werk und seine Wirkung* (Stuttgart: Alfred Kröner Verlag, 1979), 825-41.

- 5 It is worthwhile briefly mentioning here that Berkoff is also the reader of the Penguin Audiobook versions of Kafka's *The Trial*, and *Metamorphosis* and *The Judgement*, and has thus taken on something approaching the status of a quasi-official interpreter of Kafka's works, at least in Britain.
- 6 Sheridan Morley, "Punk Plays." *The Sunday Telegraph*, 30 Oct. 1975, 87.
- 7 *Ibid.*, 89.
- 8 Peter Lev, "Three Adaptations of *The Trial*," *Literature and Film Quarterly*, vol. 12, part 3 (1984), 182.
- 9 *Ibid.*, 184.
- 10 Bruce Elder, "'Doing the Inexpressible Uncommonly Well': the Theatre of Steven Berkoff." *Theatre Quarterly*, vol. VIII, no. 30 (Summer 1978), 40.
- 11 Christopher Innes, *Avant Garde Theatre 1892-1992* (London: Routledge, 1993), 100.
- 12 Berkoff's notoriously vitriolic outpourings regarding mainstream theatre in Britain may be found scattered throughout his writings and interviews. One milder example would be his statement to the effect that: "Here [in Britain] we were seeing the theatre as a mirror of society and that was a middle-class society. So success duly depended on how close the image was to the dullards who sat with their boxes of chocolates in the stalls" (Berkoff, 1991a).
- 13 Keir Elam, *The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama* (London: Routledge, 1991), 86-7.
- 14 Steven Berkoff, "The gentle outlaw," interview by Caroline Phillips. *The London Evening Standard*, 22 Nov. 1991.
- 15 Elder, *op. cit.*, 40.
- 16 Steven Berkoff, *Overview* (London: Faber and Faber, 1994), 98.
- 17 Steven Berkoff, *Meditations on Metamorphosis* (London: Faber and Faber), xvi.
- 18 *Ibid.*, 53.
- 19 *Ibid.*, 79-81.

- 20 Nicholas De Jongh, “ ‘Hello Nick, I’m going to kill you,’ “ *The Guardian*, 11 Aug. 1989.
- 21 Jean-Louis Barrault, *The Theatre of Jean-Louis Barrault* (London: Barrie & Rockliff), 126.
- 22 Berkoff, *The Trial, Metamorphosis, In the Penal Colony* (Charlbury: Amber Lane Press, 1981), 5.
- 23 In *Reflections on the Theatre* (London: Rockliff, 1951), Barrault differentiated between ‘objective’ and ‘subjective’ mime. Whereas the former, according to him, was merely the miming of imaginary objects, subjective mime was nothing less than

. . . the study of the states of the soul translated into bodily expression. The metaphysical attitude of man in space.

An intoxicating study which lifts you up to the level of religious art. When we [Barrault and the mime teacher, Étienne Decroux—my note] were pursuing our researches into subjective mime we felt we were drawing near to Oriental actors; we felt that we were discovering all over again the plastic art of Greek tragedy.

A typical theme for subjective mime is the study of the theme of death. To begin with the material struggle of the body grappling with sickness, then a moment of suspension, followed by the long, slow journey towards the abstract; suddenly overtaken by the final stroke bringing with it a transfiguration in the inmost being and in the body, in which the problem of death resolves itself by a solemn gesture, symbolic and unique in itself, detached from everything, independent like a line of pure poetry—a pure lyrical gesture (p. 28).

- 24 *Ibid.*, 30.
- 25 Berkoff, *Trial*, 71.
- 26 Berkoff, *Meditations*, 55.
- 27 *Ibid.*, xv.
- 28 *Ibid.*, 55.
- 29 Berkoff, *Trial*, 72.
- 30 *Ibid.*, 123.
- 31 Regarding what he learned at the École Jacques Lecoq about the use of an ‘organic’ ensemble, Berkoff has written in his introduction to Oscar Wilde’s *Salome* (London: Faber & Faber, 1990, xi-xii) that:
- During that time he [Jacques Lecoq] worked with the idea of the chorus as a

powerful and protean group able to be and reflect whatsoever you wished. A moving centipede of bodies that conveyed atmosphere and emotion and not just a crowd. An articulate core that fed into the environment the very atmosphere of the play.

For Lecoq's own formulation of this concept, see Jacques Lecoq, *Le théâtre du geste* (Paris: Bordas, 1987), 112.

32 Berkoff, *Meditations*, 28-9.

33 Franz Kafka, *Metamorphosis and Other Stories* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1961), 9.

34 Berkoff, *Trial*, 79.

35 *Ibid.*, 77.

36 Berkoff, *Meditations*, 108.

37 *Ibid.*, 108.

38 Berkoff, *Trial*, 72.

39 Berkoff, "Three Theatre Manifestos," *Gambit*, vol. 8, no. 32, 7.

40 Berkoff has cited French surrealist visionary Antonin Artaud (1896-1948) as perhaps his greatest inspiration in the creation of his own brand of extreme physical theatre. It was as a young actor in repertory during the mid-1960s that Berkoff read and absorbed the ideas in Artaud's masterpiece *The Theatre and Its Double* for the first time:

I couldn't believe what I was reading. It was a vision of theatre which was so over-whelming, so shattering - of lights, sound, music, text, total theatre. It suggested theatre could be a platform for most exotic rites, profanities, rituals, confessions. It was a theatre of passions, sins and vices, to see the mechanisms of the human spirit and purge it (De Jongh, 1989).

41 In his obituary tribute to Sir Laurence Olivier ("Steven Berkoff on Laurence Olivier," *The Independent Magazine*, 29 July 1989, 46), Berkoff elaborates on Artaud's notion of the sacrificial actor:

An actor should be, according to the great magician or sorcerer of the theatre Antonin Artaud, like a sacrificial victim through the flames. We go to watch a sacrifice: the sacrifice of all the most marvellous talents of human energy and mind in a daring display of courage.

Berkoff perceives Olivier and, needless to say, himself as such an actor, sacrificing everything for the performance.

42 Idris Parry in the programme notes to *Metamorphosis* (The Round House, 1969).

- 43 Steven Berkoff, *The Theatre of Steven Berkoff* (London: Methuen, 1992), 13.
 44 Berkoff, *Trial*, 72.
 45 In this context see Ritchie Robertson, "The Problem of 'Jewish Self-Hatred' in Herzl, Kraus and Kafka," *Oxford German Studies*, 16 (1985), 81-108.
 46 *Ibid.*, 71.

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