

International

Processen (The Trial)

Royal Swedish Ballet,
Royal Opera House,
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INTERPRETING AS A BALLET Franz Kafka's incomplete, yet multi-faceted novel, *The Trial*, is challenge enough, but Jiří Bubeníček has gone two complications further: by additionally referencing *The Metamorphosis*, and by morphing the hero of the story, Joseph K, into the character of Kafka himself.

It's a tough ask to accommodate the many surreal sequences of *The Trial* in just two acts of dance, but Bubeníček has had a lifetime to think it through. He comes from the same area of Prague as Kafka, and the novel was a compelling fascination throughout Bubeníček's formative years.

That he has been able to represent the labyrinthine story so completely is a

familial success, for while Bubeníček's descriptive and flowing choreography maintains a pacy theatrical momentum, it is the striking visual imagery of the production that provides an emphatic and spectacular boost. The extraordinary costumes came from the imagination of his wife, Nadina Cojocar, and the impressive mobile sets were designed by Bubeníček's twin brother, Otto, another former principal dancer.

In the dramatic scene of Josef K receiving the news of his first court hearing, the message arrives via a vintage telephone receiver lowered from the flies. His anonymous fellow bank workers crowd around, dressed from head to toe in black and white check costumes, like human chess boards, who are in turn surrounded by boxes in the same anodyne pattern. This simple yet effective design emphasised the faceless,

inhuman bureaucracy that lies at the heart of *The Trial*.

Josef K is a role akin to Spartacus or *Mayerling's* Crown Prince Rudolf, an all-consuming challenge that comes along rarely, if ever, and in this case, better late than never for Arsen Mehrabyan, nearing the end of his final season with the Royal Swedish Ballet. True to Kafka's plot, Josef K is both central to everything and a peripheral observer. He is at times heroic, stoic and pathetic, incapable of commanding events and allowing relationships to flow over and around him without grasping hold of any meaningful intimacy. Mehrabyan's mature performance articulated these essential characteristics.

Kafka had a complicated relationship with women, and so Bubeníček foregrounds the female characters of *The Trial*, giving rise to several juicy

cameos. Desislava Stoeva portrayed the sultry Fräulein Bürstner, Josef K's fellow-lodger, as a temptress who lets him kiss her, and who then rebuffs any subsequent advances; her fiery nature is emphasised by her red high heels and chilli pepper fascinator. Daria Ivanova brought strength and humour to the scantily-clad and sexually profligate Court Usher's wife, and Minji Nam was bold as Leni, the lustful nurse who finds condemned men – such as Josef K – irresistible.

The best of the male supporting roles went to the same dancer, Jérôme Marchand. He was full of fun as the flamboyant painter, Titorelli, then deadly dour as the Prison Chaplain who convinces Josef K things are going badly for him (no one has ever won a case in Kafka's world of *The Trial*), and that he must accept his fate, even though he does not know of what he is accused, nor any of any evidence against him.

Bubeníček and his collaborators have secured a remarkable achievement by capturing the mazy collage of tales in Josef K's downward spiral to die, in Kafka's words "like a dog", executed in a quarry, anticipating Kafka's own early death, aged 40, from tuberculosis. The team have packaged a complex narrative into compact dance theatre of considerable clarity; it is driven with unerring momentum and is visually splendid throughout. The tapestry of music – Alfred Schnittke and Arvo Pärt are featured amongst some 16 composers and traditional folk tunes – was descriptive of every mood, conducted by the commanding and familiar presence of Koen Kessels.

GRAHAM WATTS

Below: Arsen Mehrabyan (centre) with dancers of the Royal Swedish Ballet in *Processen (The Trial)*.

