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Arts Review

By Hannah Kenah

Kafka's Dick

play! Theatre, through April 28

Running Time: 2 hr, 20 min

Franz Kafka had the ability to dissect the world with few words. British playwright Alan Bennett is not so concise. In *Kafka's Dick*, he repeatedly rehashes a single idea: that faux-intellectuals substitute petty personal trivia for actual knowledge of an artist's work, that we focus on Kafka's small dick rather than his large ideas. Bennett's play suffers from the common artistic cold: great premise, mediocre execution. The premise is that Franz Kafka, who, at the time of his death in 1924, was an unknown writer whose dying wish was that his work be burned, comes back to life (circa 1987) and discovers that his best friend, Max Brod, has not only published the work, making Kafka one of the best-known writers of the 20th century, but also established his own fame by writing biographies of and lecturing about Kafka. In a surrealistic turn of events, both men resurrect at the home of Sydney, an insurance agent, and Linda, an ex-nurse. Brod barges into their living room after urinating on a tortoise, which then mysteriously morphs into Kafka. This creates a significant problem for Brod, who attempts to hide any evidence that he failed to execute his friend's final request. Sydney, on the other hand, is absolutely thrilled because he happens to be obsessed with the author; Franz Kafka is to Sydney as Paris Hilton is to a teenage girl. Linda, while initially disturbed by the appearance of the dead men, overcomes it well enough to strike up an aggressive flirtation with Kafka.

Structurally, Bennett's play is clever, employing Kafka's own themes of metamorphosis and persecution, and it strikes up some interesting discussions regarding fame and its consequences. But overall *Kafka's Dick* remains on the surface. Bennett's allusions and jokes reflect no more than a rudimentary knowledge of Kafka's work. It is a predictable journey into the what if.

The Coda Project's production, which marks the farewell directing endeavor of Lisa Scheps, suffers from a lack of pacing and a lack of focus. The play's repetitive text demands ferocious momentum, and Scheps does not achieve it. Though there is some merit to the individual performances, the actors seem to labor each in his own world, rarely rising above a one-note tone. Max Brod is the moderator of this play's bizarre scenario, and actor Adam Rodriguez plays him as if he's in a show where there are high stakes and heavy tension, but he has little to work with or against. Anna Maria Garcia, who plays Linda, has an awkward stage presence, which fortunately suits her character. She pulls some enjoyable facial expressions and has some of the best lines in the play. As Sydney, Skip Johnson provides levity, sincerity, and boyish enthusiasm. One of the highlights of the production is David G. Robinson, who plays Sydney's father. His character is simply trying to stay out of the nursing home by answering whatever questions are thrown his way, whether they be about simple arithmetic or Czech novelists.

The crux of this play is Franz Kafka. That role is filled here by Gabriel Newton Smith, who is misdirected and miscostumed. His Kafka is petty and irritating, and the pleather jacket he wears makes him look like a teenager having a tantrum. We see no trace of an authentically tortured artist. But the production alone cannot take the blame for this portrayal; it is built into the text. The character is wishy-washy when the play begins and whiny for the rest of it. Having always held Franz Kafka in high esteem, I feel that Bennett did not do the man justice. But as it often is with satire, the triviality is the point. *Kafka's Dick* takes place in a world in which famous people may live forever, but their lives are fair game. Even an artist as great as Franz Kafka cannot escape posthumous gossip. A funny idea, but somewhere between Bennett's script and Scheps' direction, this comedy falls flat.

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