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Ivan Klíma

Marketa Goetz-Stankiewicz

OFFICIAL But ... doesn't this story bore you?

K. No, it entertains me.

OFFICIAL I am not telling it to entertain you.

K. It entertains me by giving me an insight into the ridiculous confusion which under certain circumstances decides the existence of man.

FRANZ KAFKA *The Castle*

If we want to talk about Ivan Klíma, we must first take another look at Kafka and director Jan Grossman, the man who brought Kafka into the Czech theatre. Before Grossman decided to put Kafka on the stage, he asked himself a searching question. Was it fair to mould Kafka's highly personal prose into dramatic form? Was it not doing violence to Kafka's genius to adapt his work for the stage, to make him a dramatist? But Grossman immediately dispersed these doubts by explaining what he regards as the true nature of drama: 'We must not think about theatre as a genre that "exists" but as a genre that is forever reborn and changing. The theatre as a structure is electric: it constantly borrows from the areas of those genres which at a given moment contain the most experience and harmonize most sensitively with the intelligence and sensibility of their time.'¹

Kafka's prose, so cryptic and so full of inexplicable tensions, that it constantly provokes totally opposed interpretations, has an activating dynamism that makes it highly dramatic. Only the reader's reaction gives Kafka's prose its full concreteness, its full sense as a work of art. The reader becomes a partner whose mind is provoked into a dialogue. This dialogue is the chief prerequisite for modern theatre. And if this dialogue induces the reader to realize that the illogical has a logic of its own and that the borderlines of common sense suddenly disappear in a strange vacuum – as happens again and again in Kafka's work – he goes through an experience identical to that of an audience during the performance of an 'absurd' play.

And so Jan Grossman put the great ancestor of absurd theatre where he thought he belonged – on the stage. He staged his own dramatic version of Kafka's *The Trial* with great success in Prague. K.'s whole life span between his arrest and his execution takes place on the same sparse stage set. In addition to a staircase backstage, there is

Seven of Klíma's plays discussed here did not appear in Czechoslovakia but were published in Germany and Switzerland in German translations, which are referred to in the following notes. (*Hromobití* in *Hry* was published for performance only in mimeographed form.)

¹ Grossman 'Kafkova divadelnost' 3

only one chair, K.'s bed which later becomes a bench, and his writing desk which later becomes the judge's seat. In this way the three areas of K.'s existence – his private life, his professional work in the bank, and his situation as an accused are visually interrelated on stage. This is also the way Grossman has constructed the play. The three spheres of K.'s existence are all present and alternate in the first third of the play. In the second part K.'s private life has been suppressed; the scenes alternate only between accusation and bank: the trial has penetrated his professional life. In the third part the bank, too, has disappeared and the action is reduced to the trial authorities and K.'s hopeless struggle to discover the nature of his guilt. Thus we see K. as a private person in the beginning, an official in his job halfway through the play, and as nothing but an accused man at the end.

Under Grossman's direction the last scene, when K. is taken by two guards to his execution, was performed in such a way that the guards remain outside but close to the revolving part of the stage; several times K., trying to escape them, begins running along the revolving part, stumbles and falls over parts of the furniture, and in the end finds himself every time face to face with his guard-executioners who have remained motionless. Gradually he resigns himself and apathetically awaits his end. At the same time as the audience, K. realizes that the world in which he has been moving is a cage. The visual impression of the stage makes this cage much smaller and increasingly more claustrophobic than the epic dimensions of Kafka's novel which covers a whole year on almost as many pages as there are days in it.

But the world around K. is conceived as abnormal, incomprehensible, absurd. It consists of deformed, exaggerated characters, one of whom, for example, is played in the Prague production² as a sort of human insect, slimily wriggling around the lawyer in disgusting subservience; another is Titorelli, the painter, who combines clownish acrobatics with the smooth politeness of a head waiter and the half hidden insolence of an arriviste. The visual impact of the stage forces the viewer more radically to identify with the hero than the longest description of the same circumstances could on a printed page. While reading we can raise our eyes, reread K.'s reactions, disagree with them, quarrel with him as we undergo the nightmare of his experiences.

In the theatre, however, we are prisoners of the events unravelling on stage at a concentrated speed with relentless force. The audience sees and hears the world the way K. sees and hears it. When K. uses the telephone, the audience hears over a loudspeaker the voice that K. hears in the receiver. They know no more nor less. In the scenes with the functionaries of justice K. is literally pushed aside to a place sidestage and becomes, as it were, a member of the audience. By using stylization and deformation of characters, by combining the actors' voices with reproduced sounds and voices, counterpointed by completely silent figures, the director gains this particular kind of uncertainty, many-sidedness, and strangeness that has come to be called 'kafkaesque' even by people who have never read a line of Kafka.

² Cf Zdeněk Hořínek 'Poznámky k procesu' *Divadlo* (Jan. 1967) 61-6.

Grossman does not aim, he tells us, at an interpretation of Kafka, but at a factual reproduction of his prose on stage. This is why he is critical of the version dramatized by André Gide and Jean-Louis Barrault who approached the novel psychologically, interpreted some of the events as tortured dreams, and totally missed Kafka's most basic quality, that tension between everyday reality and inexplicable occurrences.³

In October 1964 another 'Kafka-play' appeared on a Prague stage – Klíma's *The Castle* – again directed by Grossman. Despite its openly sailing under Kafka's flag – this is reflected not only in the title but also in the hero's name, Kan – the play's relation to Kafka's novel is curiously inverted. It seems important to try to see this relation with some measure of clarity because it reflects on essential questions of Czechoslovak theatre, and accordingly I have given more space to *The Castle* than the play deserves as a theatrical work.

The plot of *The Castle* concerns Josef Kan's arrival at the Castle in order to work together with the renowned scientists, artists, and 'deserving' politicians who inhabit it. The play begins with a shock effect. The stage instructions are as follows: 'In the darkness a long choking scream is heard. The scream is heard again; the terrible scream of a man who is being choked and frees himself for an instant from the choking grip. It dies away, stifled. A moment of silence. Quick steps of a person; the partition is moved to the side. The light illuminates a hand that is extended toward the string of the chandelier. The chandelier is lit. Centre scene is a bed with dead Ilja, at the bed stands Cyril, putting something into his pocket. Bernard as always at the window, which he opens. Emil is sitting motionless on a chair that faces the cupboard with a mirror. In the room there are several more chairs and an old fashioned writing desk. At the side wall a large decorated partition. When the light goes on Filipa comes running in, her hair loose obviously as if she were just going to comb it.'⁴

As the characters on stage begin to discuss this event, the hero, Josef Kan, arrives, apologizing for the clearly inconvenient time of his visit. During the following scenes we find out more about the inhabitants of the castle. Their alleged work, to which Kan refers initially with deep reverence, consists of doing precisely nothing. They stuff themselves at meals and tell dirty jokes. They show off with stories about their past great deeds in the world outside but have obviously lost all contact with it. They look alike, whistle alike, think alike. They squabble and obviously suspect each other of the young scientist Ilja's death, but it gradually becomes clear that they murdered him in unison. It also appears that Kan has taken the victim's place in every sense of the word. The very night of his arrival he is forced to sleep in the bed where his predecessor has just died.

As Kan begins to realize that the circumstances surrounding the death are highly suspect, justice seems to be on the way. An official arrives who has been delegated to

find out the truth about the murder. He stages interrogations and finally reconstructs the circumstances of the deed by asking each of the group to play the role he played during the murder. Kan tries to add his own observations but is silenced. The final irony comes as a shock: the face of justice was a mask. The official, satisfied with what he has found, delivers an ambiguous speech and withdraws with polite wishes for successful further work, leaving the scene free for the inevitable final scene: the murder is re-enacted with Kan as the victim. The play ends with the lamp being turned off by the same hand that had lit it in the first scene and another terrible scream rises from the darkened stage as the curtain falls.

The play evoked from Western critics two types of reactions that were contrary to the playwright's intentions. First, it was considered a successor to or an extension of Kafka's novel. When staged in Düsseldorf in 1966, critics' comments had headings like 'On Kafka's Tracks,' 'Kafka-Variations,' 'A Breath of Kafka on the Düsseldorf Stage.'⁵ Such a reaction could not surprise anyone, not even the playwright who had built his play around the central symbol of Kafka's novel. Yet Klíma tells us that his inspiration came from other sources. First there was his visual and histrionic sense. He imagined 'the terrible cry of a strangled person even before the curtain rises, only then the light goes on, the murdered one is lying on the stage and all the characters talk about his death-it is clear that one of them had to be the murderer.'⁶ This is an old trick à la Agatha Christie (whom Klíma read at the time), but one that always works. The second source of inspiration was his personal experience in the Castle Dobříš which the Czech Government had assigned to the nation's writers as a pleasant and quiet place for them to compose works about life 'outside' the castle walls. Klíma, who spent only a brief time in Dobříš, soon realized that the atmosphere of exclusiveness, peace, and freedom from want amidst a restless, suffering world had a disastrous influence on creative minds.

The second reaction of Western critics was conditioned by a newly discovered, conveniently topical master-key to Eastern European absurd plays: the realistic impact of absurd situations on stage and the topical political meaning they had for the audience. For example, the Düsseldorf performance of Klíma's *The Castle* was called 'a thinly disguised critique of a society moulded by Stalinism.'⁷ To be sure, in a society where the individual's life is so closely surveyed by the system, the audience's highly trained political awareness will tend to relate what happens on stage to what is happening in real life. It is probably impossible for a play in a totalitarian society to have an entirely non-political effect. Moreover the Czech audience was likely to catch the sardonic allusion to Dobříš Castle. But to strip these eloquent comments on today's world of anything but a localized political meaning, is not only to do them an injustice but also to miss their deeper and more lasting levels.

⁵ Klíma *Theaterstücke* (Lucerne and Frankfurt/Main 1971) II/7

⁶ *Ibid* II/2

⁷ Hans Schwab-Felisch 'Das sozialisierte Schloss' *Theater heute* (March 1966) 46

³ Grossman 'Kafkova divadelnost' II

⁴ Klíma *Zámek* (Prague 1965) 7

The critical essay that appeared together with the Czech edition of Klíma's play *The Castle* contains an interesting section: 'Klíma followed the steps of the land-surveyor K. to our own days. He did not think them up in unpleasant dreams, he really found them here. He, too, came face to face with the Castle. Today it is deprived of terror, because we are able to realize that it was created by men and that which is created by men can be changed by men.'⁸ Kafka has been turned inside out. The inhabitants of the Castle – mysterious figures with secret powers which are transmitted by mysterious messengers – have become hollow, sterile creatures whose cliché-bound thinking and primitive sensuality present a danger only in so far as they are in power. What Klíma actually does in his allegedly kafkaesque play is quite unkafkaesque: he explores a state of rigidity and petrification in a similar manner to Albee in *The American Dream*. For example, the writer in Klíma's play still calls himself 'a writer,' although he has not written a line for ages; Albee's impotent 'father' and his sterile mate call each other 'Mommy' and 'Daddy' only to keep up the appearance of the role. These characters stultify and ultimately destroy the young generation.

This similarity of 'message' between the Czech and the American writer is interesting for the simple reason that it occurs quite rarely. It occurs rarely because Czech 'absurd' theatre is hardly ever didactic, while American 'absurd' theatre often is. The Czechs and Slovaks have clearly noticed this emphasis.⁹ (I will discuss these tendencies more fully in chapter 9.) For the moment what concerns us is that Klíma's *The Castle* brought the great outsider of Czechoslovak literature, Franz Kafka, to the centre of attention. To use Kafka as a spring-board was a good idea because the famous borrowed name of the play helped it to be staged in Germany and sparked immediate attention among Western commentators who never fail to mention it in even the briefest assessments of Czech theatre. But the real merit of the play lies elsewhere, in its being the first work openly to integrate the work of Kafka into Czech literature.

Yet some Czechs saw more deeply. Jan Grossman, who directed the play, saw it as a forecast of Klíma's later works. In his essay on Kafka, Grossman discusses the nature of K.'s guilt. Although K. – and this is true also of Klíma's character – at first refuses to accept the senseless and therefore alien reality, he refuses in principle only. In principle he considers it nonsensical or absurd but in practice he goes along with it. We are reminded of a contemporary satirical sketch by another Czech author that shows a huge YES which, on closer inspection, turns out to consist of innumerable little 'nos' and a huge NO that is made up of little 'yesses'.¹⁰ By accepting in practice what is happening to him, K. 'legalizes, conventionalizes and normalizes'¹¹ the absurd situation. It is obvious that we are knee-deep in the problematic nature of society –

be it the systematized, rigid value-structure of totalitarianism or the fluidity of democracy where any value has become a matter of 'opinion.'

In Prague, of course, people saw the play *their* way, despite the fact that the director studiously avoided any explicit reference to a topical situation. He even created a sense of alienation on the stage-set itself by featuring a circular horizon, a huge baroque painting of a monster, and organ music. With a mind raised on Kafka he managed to let the uncanny, terrifying element arise imperceptibly – as it does in Kafka's work – from concrete details, the slight shifting of which suddenly produces a sense of horror.¹² But an audience constantly subjected to the pressures of a non-democratic society outside the theatre are bound to grasp the play in a highly realistic way. The very idea of guilt becoming arbitrary is pregnant with political meaning. In the West we have had several versions of Kafka on the stage, yet we have not been particularly struck by the political explosiveness of these problems. This merely shows that political theatre in the West must be explicit in order to be recognized as such. In Eastern European countries reading between the lines has become a game, almost to the point of obsession. In most Western countries, where there is less need for political criticism to wear a mask, the game fails to create tension and generate excitement.

Kafka's great novel is about a young man who is trying to get into the Castle to do some work there but who never succeeds and who becomes old in the process of trying to find his way into the complex alien hierarchy. Klíma's play is about a young man who arrives at the Castle in order to work there but is murdered by its inhabitants. Kafka's hero is prevented from what he considers to be his duty – carrying out his calling – by having to cope with endless difficulties so that all his emotions and mental energies are used up in constantly intensified efforts directed toward a constantly diminishing goal. Kafka's hero cannot get *into* the Castle; Klíma's hero cannot get *out* of it. The struggle to find out about the reality of the Castle has turned, for Klíma's hero, into an awareness of that reality. The unknown enemy has become known. This, of course, is no longer Kafka. But then, Klíma did not want to become Kafka's follower and we must free him from this image for which he himself was responsible.

Yet here too we must pause and reflect. At the end of one of Klíma's later plays, *The Double Room*, the main characters are exhausted from their struggle to achieve what they believed in achieving, and in their numb resignation there is a recognition that reminds us of K.'s attitude. They know there are still things to be done and lives to be lived but not for these people. In the first chapter of Kafka's novel the hero gazes through the clear air of the winter morning in the direction of the castle towering in the distance. At this moment he is aware of its promise of 'fulfilment';¹³

⁸ Alena Urbanová 'Pohodlí zámku' Afterword to Ivan Klíma *Zámek* 68

⁹ Zdeněk Hořínek 'Úděl zavržence' 61

¹⁰ Jiří Jirásek *Kamení* (Brno 1967) 18

¹¹ Grossman 'Kafkova divadelnost' 17

¹² See Christian Gneuss 'Wandlungen in Prag, die tschechische Theaterstruktur und das Unbehagen an der Spielerei' *Theater heute* (Nov. 1966) 4.

¹³ Kafka *Das Schloss* (Frankfurt/Main 1958) 13

only later does he realize his 'ignorance of the circumstances.'¹⁴ Klíma's earlier play wore only Kafka's mask, whereas his later plays have grasped the core of Kafka's meaning.

As we saw earlier, Klíma returned to Kafka once again in 1974 when he collaborated with Pavel Kohout on a dramatic version of *Amerika*.¹⁵ Was his spiritual affinity with Kafka so strong that he felt he had to steep himself in the work which had received less dramatic attention than the other two? Was he encouraged by Kohout, whose clown character August (discussed in chapter 3) shares certain psychological aspects with Karl Rossmann, the victimized yet strangely indomitable hero of *Amerika*? These are questions that may be answered by future commentators. The fact is that in a unique bout of cooperation, the two writers shaped a play from Kafka's novel in which they kept meticulously to Kafka's original text. This was possible by means of a narrator who bridges the various scenes and provides a commentary on the events.

Kafka's powerful, densely packed first two sentences, which describe and allude to images, situations and concepts which dominate the rest of the book, are read as Prologue at the outset of the dramatized version, thus setting the scene for the whole play: 'As Karl Rossmann, a boy of sixteen, who had been packed off to America by his poor parents after a servant girl had seduced him and got herself pregnant, stood on the liner which was already slowing down as it entered the harbor of New York, he saw the statue of the Goddess of Liberty, sighted long before, as if it had been illuminated by a suddenly increased burst of sunshine. The arm with the sword rose up as if recently stretched aloft, and round the figure blew the free winds.'¹⁶ From there on one adventure or mishap of the hero follows the next in quick succession. Kafka's text is only shortened; no other changes are made.

The two adapters' loyalty to the original is so consistent that it raised sceptical comments among German critics after the premiere at the Krefeld Theatre in March 1978. One of them, for example, felt that the Czech authors had radically reduced the complex novel to the 'external shape of the various events.'¹⁷ This judgment was partly justified because of the unfortunate nature of the production which ignored the carefully worked out psychological dynamics of the play as well as the finer philosophical points which the adapters had taken care not to obstruct.

The production at the Vienna Volkstheater¹⁸ which opened in the autumn of 1978 came closer to the secret chiaroscuro pattern of the novel which reveals how the land of unlimited dreams gradually becomes a land of unsuspected horrors. An initially mercurial and chaplinesque but later more and more tormented Karl Rossmann tries

to cope with a surrounding which was undergoing an increasingly grotesque and uncanny metamorphosis (a ship, a hotel, a brothel, and the big theatre in Oklahoma were suggested with minimal but powerful props on the revolving stage set).

A close analysis of the Czech dramatization and a comparison with the original work should yield most interesting results, but in this context we must limit ourselves to one aspect only – the treatment of law and guilt. Karl Rossmann, during his employment as an elevator operator in the Hotel Occidental in New York, abandons for a short while the elevator of which he was in charge. He is found to have neglected his duty and thus broken the regulations governing the hotel staff. To be sure, he had begged one of his colleagues, whose work he had taken on that night, to oblige him in return and take charge of the elevator for a little while (while he, Karl, quickly took care of a drunken friend who would have caused disturbances of all sorts in the elegant hotel). The neglect of his duty, therefore, weighed against the possible embarrassment to the hotel management if the drunk had been noticed by the guests, was indeed much the lesser of two evils (after all, nothing at all went wrong with the elevator during Karl's brief absence).

However, the powers that be in the hotel took a different view. During a cross-examination, conducted by the Head Waiter and the Chief Desk Clerk, Karl's guilt towards the letter of the law as well as towards persons of authority in the hotel hierarchy is amply proved. He is cross-examined, humiliated, and fired.

During the cross-examination, the following exchange takes place:

HEAD WAITER *craftily* Perhaps you were suddenly taken sick?

KARL *giving him a scrutinizing look (actually wondering whether the Head Waiter had noticed the unfortunate mess the drunken friend had made by being sick into the elevator shaft – an occurrence that gave Karl the incentive to leave the elevator and get the drunk out of the way)* No.

HEAD WAITER *shouting loudly* So you weren't even sick? ... Then you must have thought up some grand lie. What excuses are you going to offer? Come on, talk!

KARL I didn't know that I had to telephone to ask for permission.

HEAD WAITER That's really priceless! *seizing Karl by the collar and almost slinging him across to a list of elevator service regulations which was pinned to the wall – the Desk Clerk follows them* There! Read! ... Aloud!¹⁹

Karl subsequently explains that he has carefully read the service regulations but that he forgot the exact wording because the particular paragraph is rarely needed – besides, he had been working at the hotel for the past two months and had never left his post for a minute. This reasoning is flatly rejected of course, and Karl Rossmann's downfall takes its course. The accused had tried to apologize for his transgression by referring first to the insignificant aspect of the rule he had broken, and secondly to its rare applicability. He put forth this reasoning in the hope that it would make sense to

¹⁴ Jochen Schmidt 'Heisst Kafka August?' 58

¹⁵ Kohout and Klíma *Amerika*

¹⁶ Kafka *Amerika* (New York 1953) 9

¹⁷ Jochen Schmidt 'Heisst Kafka August?' 58

¹⁸ The production opened on 22 Sept. 1978 under the direction of Maxi Tschunko.

¹⁹ Kafka *Amerika* 195-6

his superiors. By so doing, however, he imposed relativistic values on legal points and thus came in conflict with the absolute concept of the letter of the law. .

His 'guiltlessness' – not having consciously done anything wrong therefore turns to 'guilt' in the absolute eyes of the law – not having observed the law precisely, and having depended on a private promise rather than on a legal agreement. The personal aspect had taken the upper hand in his actions; complex human loyalties had led him to ignore the letter of the law. But such considerations have no room in Kafka's universe. The human being is deformed into performing mechanized functions according to abstract and absolute instructions. On Kafka's heroes these gradual and painful deformation experiments are performed, and with meticulous care Kafka observes the various stages of deformation.

When, in about 1963 or 1964, Ivan Klíma read Dürrenmatt's *The Accident*²⁰ in Polish translation, he felt as if he were having 'a revelation.'²¹ The Swiss writer's story (which is also known in a radio play version) is about an average man – not evil, but no angel either – with the usual mixture of human weaknesses and ambitions, a little bit of ruthlessness when needed, and an occasional touch of self indulgence.

This Everyman is stranded one evening in a small town and is invited to spend the night in the house of a retired judge who also invites his old colleagues, a prosecuting attorney and a defending lawyer, for dinner. During the sumptuous meal, when the greatest delicacies are served, the three old men entertain themselves and their visitor by staging a mock court case in which each of them carries out his judicial function and the visitor is cast in the role of the accused. In brilliant legal arguments developed between coq au vin and crepes suzette the three representatives of justice manage to convince their defendant of being 'guilty' in all walks of life. Next morning, when they come to his room to tell him how they enjoyed the evening, they find him dead: he has carried out their playful verdict and has hanged himself from the window frame.

This was what sparked Klíma's imagination. In Dürrenmatt's story a verdict was spoken and a man carried out what he took to be justice. Perhaps he hung himself merely in order to avoid the question of how he could go on living after his eyes had been opened to the fact that guilt had crept into his life, not with a dramatic breaking of the written law, but as an imperceptible process, edging its way through the loopholes of seemingly inconsequential weaknesses and allegedly necessary aggressions. Was he unable to bear the awareness of being guilty without having the glory of being a great man? Dürrenmatt does not tell us. But what he implies – and what fascinated Klíma – is that justice as a system knows only extreme positions, and refuses to acknowledge the vast spectrum, for it is in the ambiguity and variety of life that the artist finds his material.

Ivan Klíma's main concern as a playwright is basically as much akin to Kafka as it is to Dürrenmatt. The best example of his kinship to both writers appeared a whole decade after his version of *The Castle* and his discovery of Dürrenmatt: *Games* (1974), a full length play, brilliant both theatrically and philosophically, reassesses the complex issue of man's rights and the forms of his guilt. Klíma's particular closeness to Kafka and Dürrenmatt lies in his exploration of the secret, highly charged connection between 'right' and guilt and the way they can create or cancel each other. The right to have an opinion, for example, is directly connected to the guilt of not making the correct choice. The right to assert yourself is related to the guilt of overcoming others. And so on. Such thematics sound forbidding for the stage, but Klíma clothes his speculations in so colourful and imaginative a form that his plays are not weighed down by ideas but remain stage-worthy.

Although Klíma has written more prose works than plays, his feeling for the stage is obvious. Less analytical than Havel and less poetic than Topol, he tells us his plays are usually sparked off by a particular event and, he says, rapidly written. He knows how to use cliché, slapstick situations (two lovers alone, interrupted by funny incidents), or well-worn stage-tricks (cakes, some of which are poisoned – the audience can't keep track which – being passed around and eaten) with complete assurance as to how they will work on stage. All this, of course, seems far from the bleak rigidity of *The Castle*. But the basic unity is there. Klíma's earnest search for justice has merely decided to put on fancy dress in order to perform its task anonymously.

On the face of it, Klíma's *The Master* (1967) looks like a conventional detective story. A carpenter delivers a coffin to a family home, and claims that it has been ordered. None of the inhabitants of the house knows anything about it. Yet later it appears that the delivery of the coffin was not based on a mistake, for one member of the family is found to have died in his room upstairs. Moreover it appears that he died under suspicious circumstances, after having drunk poisoned milk. This is, of course, a perfect situation for a detective story: the four inhabitants of the house are all under suspicion; even the master-carpenter who brought the coffin is a possible suspect. He becomes a sort of confessor for every single member of the household, and discovers each of them to be a potential murderer. Again, in the tradition of the detective story, the circle of suspects decreases, and the members of the household die, one after another, until only the dead man's daughter is left. The revelation of the truth seems imminent.

Unlike a detective story, however, this play has no revelation. Obviously none of the suspects committed the murder, and the fact that the master-carpenter might conceivably be the guilty one seems not only unsatisfactory but also irrelevant. This feeling of the irrelevance of the whole 'case' has been wedging its way into the mind of the reader since he first has the inkling that he is being led up the garden path by a false detective story. However, the playwright's deception of the reader as to the

²⁰ Dürrenmatt *Die Panne* (Zürich 1959)

²¹ Klíma *Theaterstücke* 1/8

actual nature of his play is counteracted by the fact that he provides clues that would reveal this deception: he does this by suggesting that the conventional detective secret – who is the murderer? – conceals within itself a further, much more complex secret.

It is the secret of the hidden forms of guilt every man – unless he be a saint – incurs by not fighting constantly for what he believes to be true and good. In the play the paralysis of moral indifference is represented as a kind of death. Klíma has embodied it in the strangely aloof figure of the master-carpenter who stalks death with his ever-ready coffin but who also dispenses a consolation that results in euphoric numbness and submerges the will to act.

The master-carpenter constantly refers to an ideal place which he describes as a desert where the stars are near and anguish is burned away in the clean sand. All the inhabitants of the house fall prey to the reassuring beauty of this vision; only the young woman Františka withstands it. No longer able to distinguish between guilt and innocence (all her relatives have fallen dead and the murderer remains unknown), she still refuses to be lulled into irresponsible oblivion of the here and now. When the master-carpenter wants to take her to his ‘desert,’ she says she would rather go to the police station. ‘You know how to speak beautifully,’ she tells him, ‘but what are these words in a world where words have been completely separated from deeds? Your desert? What is that desert of yours? ... Do you believe in it? And what if you long ago stopped believing in anything except those words which flow from your lips of their own accord, still beautiful and still alluring? ... You care for nothing but your vision. You would be capable for its sake ... to use everything ... even our pain ... And the fear you awakened in us.’ (Softly) ‘It is so close: consolation and death-hope and despair ...’²²

The implication of such a passage is obvious to anyone aware of the Communist vision of an ideal future in the name of which deeds of violence are justified. But Klíma has written more than a topical play. Descending to a deeper and more universal level of meaning we find that self-justification by means of a selfless aim is a widespread disease – and as soon as we have said so, we are bound to question the use in this context of the word ‘disease,’ wanting, perhaps, to substitute it with a non-committal term like ‘phenomenon,’ and having thereby provided a perfect illustration of the general confusion about the meaning of ‘guilt.’

The Master was never performed in Czechoslovakia. Apparently no director could be found who could understand it. When it appeared in print the heady intellectual excitement of the times was not favourable to a speculative study of this sort. People were not in the mood for detective stories that ended in metaphysical question marks. Although the problem of an individual’s guilt was highly topical material, there was a need for more clarity. Even if the nature of justice was revealed as remaining beyond human grasp, there was some need to define the villain more clearly than by means of a passive death-wish in man. Although Czechoslovaks of the sixties were ready for

²² Klíma *Mistr* (Prague 1967) 59

Beckett and Pinter, they seem to have been able to accept a local work of metaphysical complexity only if it was a work of poetry. It was Josef Topol who provided this type of writing for the stage. Klíma never pretended to be a poet. This is why this remarkable work never reached the Czechoslovak stage. Klíma seems to have learned his lesson: the ‘murder case’ of his next play does not require the audience to brush up their metaphysics.

The second and last of Klíma’s plays to be performed in Czechoslovakia was *The Jury*, a remarkable tour de force that takes up the question of a man’s guilt with a combination of philosophical ambiguity, grotesque legalism, and dramatic momentum. The very title makes us alert. We are prepared for something like this: a group of people having to decide the fate of another man; an assessment of guilt or innocence based on the objective opinion of disinterested fellow men; a man to be judged on the basis of legal evidence and common sense. The absurd twist of Klíma’s play – as the audience and the jury find out about half-way through the play – is that the accused man is dead already and the jury’s verdict will be merely a theoretical judgment of a case that has in effect been closed.

The motley group confronted with this unusual situation consists of a former army captain, a barber, a milkmaid, an engineer, and an archivist. It does not take long to gather the reasons for this choice of characters. The ‘case’ will be assessed by the soldier bent on carrying out commands, unused to asking questions and quick to dispense labels like ‘traitor’; the manager of a small business whose success depends as much on how he can entertain and occupy people’s thoughts as it does on the way he trims their hair; a simple-minded country woman frightened by the task, frantically taking notes about everyone’s speeches because she is afraid she will forget what she is supposed to remember; a young engineer, pragmatic and impatient to ‘have the thing clear’²³ and get the job finished; and a conscientious scholar for whom ‘justice’ is a big word and who worries about the ethical implications of his decisions.

The man on whom the group is to pronounce judgment has been accused of murdering a young woman but the event remains so vague and is referred to in such contradictory ways that the audience is unable to form its own judgment. Gradually, however, they realize that the accused is of minor importance; it is the jury who is on trial here – a group of ordinary people faced with the choice between making a decision to the best of their conscience and putting a stamp of approval on a case that has already been decided. Clearly, the authorities want the verdict to be ‘guilty.’ They make sure that the jury realizes this. Not long after the beginning of the play the question in the minds of the audience is no longer ‘is the accused guilty or not guilty?’ but rather ‘will the jury perform its task as puppets of an authority that has made up its mind?’

The verdict has become merely a matter of principle, no longer related to the actual fate of the defendant. The playwright subtly suggests the characteristics of the

²³ Klíma *Porota in Divadlo* (Sept. 1968) 85

members of the jury and reveals how their minds give in under steadily mounting pressure. Even after learning that the accused is already dead – beheaded, as the Engineer finds out, and not shot while escaping, as the authorities claim – the jury is not allowed to close deliberations; they have been locked into the building and soldiers are marching up and down outside, urging them on to pass a ‘just’ verdict. And so they begin to realize what the audience has known for some time, that they must pass a verdict not on the alleged murderer but on themselves.

Gradually they become aware of a predominant feeling that is directly connected with the moral decision they are facing. It is the fear of contradicting the authorities. The army captain, accustomed to act rather than to think, is the first to pronounce the verdict ‘guilty.’ Gradually he is joined by the Barber and the Milkmaid and finally even the Engineer who, realizing that the whole thing is a show prepared for public consumption, no longer cares.

Only the Archivist, conscientiously repeating the contradictory aspects of the accusation, remains unswayed and makes his ethical gesture by pronouncing the accused ‘not guilty.’ However, even this act of moral courage becomes part of the system it is trying to oppose. In the words of the Judge the Archivist’s verdict ‘contributed to the certainty of the complete independence of the tribunal;²⁴ in other words, it helped to provide the image of justice before the public eye. Alone on the stage during the last few minutes of the play, the Archivist bitterly assesses the role he has played in furthering manipulation and injustice.

The Czech reviewer who compares the gradual change of the jury’s attitude to that of the citizens in Ionesco’s *Rhinoceros* seems to have overlooked the basically different motivation. Klíma’s jury changes on the premises that ‘it’s all the same anyway,²⁵ whereas Ionesco’s people change because ‘one has to keep an open mind ... and we must move with the times.’²⁶ The former decision is based on the awareness that heroism is not only dangerous but also useless; the latter is prompted by thoughtless gregariousness and the refusal to be different. On the whole Klíma’s people know that their decision has nothing to do with what they think is right; Ionesco’s people think their decision is based on what is right. The characters in the Czech play watch themselves changing into rhinos, never losing sight of the human image they are abandoning; the characters in the French play invert the values: the rhinos become people and the people become monsters.

It is surprising that *The Jury* was staged in Prague as late as April 1969 when, naturally, it caused agitated applause and obvious excitement among the audience. The reason that it was censored only at a later date may be found in the fact that the

play could be and indeed was interpreted²⁷ as a comment on the false claims of democracies that pretend to let the people have their share in decisions. That the play can be taken as a comment on the problem of justice in entirely different social systems shows that Klíma’s play plumbs greater depths than the manipulations of justice in a country that is being ‘normalized’ back into a system.

On closer inspection it appears that the manipulators themselves are passive parts of the system and play their roles as a result of circumstances rather than by free choice. ‘We all know it,’ confides the Judge to the Archivist (whom he significantly now calls a ‘colleague’), ‘Murderers are among us. Certainly we ask ourselves the question whether one can live like that, not to speak of passing judgements. But every question has its time. And each of us has his role.’²⁸ Klíma implies that the Judge, who in this play seems to be at the head of the manipulation, is only another wheel in the big machinery. He knows it and accepts it.

The anonymity of modern mass society permits people to dispense with a personal conscience. In fact there seems to be no place for it. Consider the Archivist who had a personal conscience. What good did it do? Like Friedrich Dürrenmatt, Klíma seems to claim that it is impossible to represent justice on today’s stage because all forms of power are ‘submerged in faceless abstraction ... Today’s state has become anonymous, bureaucratic ... and can be represented only statistically.’²⁹ But, also like Dürrenmatt, Klíma creates individual figures who oppose this machinery in their own, perhaps ridiculous and imperfect way. And although their efforts come to naught, although they too inevitably contribute their drops to an ocean of guilt around them, still they show – as Dürrenmatt thinks – that there is still some courage left in man, and – as Klíma thinks – that ‘in a deaf and blinded world a kindred soul can be found.’³⁰

Is this too modest an aim for a contemporary playwright? Perhaps. But as soon as we ask such a question we are involved in the complex argument whether, as Shaw and Brecht thought, the playwright ought to try to change the world, or, as Ionesco and probably Pinter think, he should merely attempt to express an incommunicable reality. Klíma himself worries about these questions and is both cautious and humble in formulating his response.³¹ He feels that the very process of asking questions leads a writer to recognize the attempts of other related writers to answer them. This inspires him to ask more questions and makes him aware of the magical power of human language.

²⁷ Eva Šormová ‘Porota’ *Divadlo* (Sept. 1969) 57-8. The same idea, though modified, is expressed in Paul Krontorad, ‘Das Wechselspiel zwischen Drama und Bühne’ *Theater heute* (Jan. 1969) 37.

²⁸ Klíma *Porota* 97

²⁹ Dürrenmatt ‘Theaterprobleme’ *Theater-Schriften und Reden* (Zürich 1966) 120

³⁰ Klíma *Theaterstücke* IV/7

³¹ *Ibid* I/8

²⁴ *Ibid* 97

²⁵ *Ibid* 92

²⁶ Ionesco *Rhinoceros* tr Derek Prouse in *Rhinoceros, The Chairs, The Lesson* (Harmondsworth 1967) 97, 103

Four highly theatrical one-act comedies followed *The Jury*, and at first sight one would hardly recognize the author of *The Castle* and *The Jury*. The author's vivid stage sense seems to have come with his decision to provide amusement because 'what sense is there in torturing minds that are already filled with anxieties.'³² Despite this rather gloomy incentive Klíma has written very funny plays, though the laughter they evoke is none too comforting. But then – as we have been shown from Aristophanes to Moliere and Shaw – laughter somehow rarely is.

The four plays have catchy and, of course, rather misleading titles: *Klara and Two Men*, *Café Myriam*, *A Bridegroom for Marcela*, and *The Double Room*. In each of them the central character strives to attain something. That something is very simple; in fact, in three of the four cases it could be called dire necessity: To be alone from time to time; to choose your mate yourself; to have a place to raise your family. The fourth one is a little more demanding; it is the wish to be happy. But that does not mean that the other wishes are more easily attainable. All are thwarted. In each instance Klíma has built his play around one of his 'kindred spirits' who summons the courage to refuse to join the doings of the world around him, whether it means refusing to trust anyone, or getting things at the cost of others, or letting the system consume your private life.

None of the four plays has been performed in the author's home country. No member of a Czech or Slovak local audience had the opportunity to let the author know whether he had achieved what he considers to be any playwright's basic task: to make the audience feel that 'whatever is happening on stage is about themselves, that each of their problems, emotions or words – no matter how insignificant – is familiar to the characters on stage.'³³

Klara and Two Men had its first production in German at the Atelier-Theater in Vienna in 1971. It is an amusing yet deeply serious one-act play about how and whether to enjoy life. 'I like to be happy,'³⁴ says the naive heroine of the play who is surprised that there seem to be people who do not seem to share this preference. Her world is one where pleasures are considered the only legitimate goal in life and the harassments which stem from problems perennial or topical are simply pushed aside gently with the reminder 'don't think about that now.'³⁵ We are reminded of the lesson the tensely conscientious English writer learned from *Zorba the Greek* who believed that a man should dance as often and as long as possible.³⁶ However, Klíma does not grant his Klara the full victory of the passionate Greek. The play, written rapidly during a short spring holiday, starts out looking like a bedroom farce and ends with an existential outcry into silent darkness. The scene is Klara's room, cluttered up

³² Ibid IV/8

³³ Ibid I/6

³⁴ *Klara und zwei Herren* in Klíma *Theaterstücke 3*; (Czech title: *Klára a dva páni*)

³⁵ In the play Klara uses this phrase in variations more than twenty times.

³⁶ Nikos Kazantzakis *Zorba the Greek* (London 1961)

with potted plants, radios and transistors because, although she likes many things, one thing she does not like is silence.

When the curtains open, Klara enters with a bunch of flowers and a man. The first line explains the situation: 'Man: (looking around ...) So this is where you live.'³⁷ The audience has been alerted for what is likely to follow: a first attempt at love-making interrupted by all kinds of difficulties. This is indeed what does happen, but the difficulties are different from what we expect. It turns out that in the next room Klara's former lover is dying of cancer and his faint voice carries through the wall, begging for forms of help that seem as absurd to Klara's visitor as they do to the audience: the voice asks for wire and dogs. Klara, who has been providing both for the last weeks, calmly explains to her puzzled visitor that there is nothing strange about these requests. .

KLARA Wire. He always wants wire ... He'd been in prison probably and knows when there is wire all around, he can't get away. And now he doesn't want to go away. He wants to stay here. Here. With me. And altogether-here. Later he'll want me to bring the dog.

MAN The dog?

KLARA They were probably watched by dogs there.

The faint but insistent voice on the other side of the wall keeps interrupting the Man's increasingly half hearted attempts to make love to Klara (who obviously is perfectly prepared to do so):

VOICE Klara!

MAN Klara!

KLARA *her head had been resting in the Man's lap* Pardon?

MAN He is calling you!

KLARA Don't think about it.

MAN *desperately* He wants the dog.

KLARA I have no dog.

VOICE Klara!

MAN *desperately* But he will keep calling again and again!

KLARA Don't listen to him.

VOICE Klara!

MAN I can't stand it!

KLARA Well, then you have to go and bark.

MAN I should go and bark? ... Klara, I came to you and now I should bark?

KLARA Oh, don't think about it.

MAN On all fours or upright?

³⁷ *Klara und zwei Herren 3*

KLARA He doesn't see you anyway. It is dark. He only wants to hear the dogs.
MAN Alright, Klara, I am going.³⁸

The Man does not have to bark long. Soon the fall of a body is heard. Under Klara's orders he has to help her bring the dead man into her room and put him on the couch where he remains until the end of the play, by which time the Man predictably leaves without having done what he intended.

So much for a realistic obstacle regarding the Man's endeavours – a death (though not his own) thwarted the embrace. But there is another dimension to the play which opens up a quite different reality. Throughout the action all sorts of inexplicable things keep happening. Several times the phone rings and voices ask for the Man although he protests 'no one knows that I am here. Half an hour ago not even *I myself* knew that I'd be here.' Another tenant rings the bell at midnight with suspicious requests. All these incidents visibly unnerve the Man, whereas to Klara they seem perfectly normal occurrences. Everything is natural for Klara. At one point, when the Man has gone into the room next door, she actually picks up the phone and talks to God, to her 'friendly, fat God who wears sandals,' to whom she has always prayed whenever she has broken off with a lover. But now her God does not answer, she cannot even see him as she is used to; her desperate assertion 'But I want to – I want to be happy!' and her plea 'This one time, a last time, one more last time ... Don't leave me!'³⁹ remain unanswered and the only sound that is heard as the light goes out is water running from the tap she has turned on in her desperate attempts to break the unbearable silence.

And so the bedroom farce has turned out to be a play about human fear: the whole spectrum of fear beginning with the concrete fear of being caught in an illicit love affair, moving on to a more general anxiety generated by mistrust of other people (the Man is uneasy about the woman tenant at the door), and ending with a constant sense of some kind of persecution (he examines the phone, worries about who might have seen him come).

At the end of the play the fear expands and deepens; it becomes a kind of existential terror, a 'Weltangst,' that engulfs the whole world of the stage, including Klara herself. No longer able to find the answer to life in seeking pleasure, no longer able to conduct amicable conversations with a friendly paternal God, she cries out into the silence in a final scene that reminds us of Camus' *The Misunderstanding*, in which an equally desperate plea for the meaning of an absurd event meets with stony silence.

Thus the ghost of fear forces its way relentlessly into the comfort of a well-lit room resounding with modern rock music. The words of the man next door, for whom the loss of freedom in the past has become the spiritual haven of safety in the delirium of death, acts as a grotesque subplot to the theme of fear. The visitor, who

knows no cure for his own fear, is made to dispel the fears of another by absurdly summoning the fears of the past.

With Klara's character the playwright asks an open question about human happiness in today's world. The apparent banality of the question should not deceive us about its urgency. 'By trying frantically to see only that which we wish to see,' Klíma asks, 'can we hope to wriggle through the barbed wire, suffering, horror, pain, humiliation and hopeless dying which surround us on all sides? Are there sounds that will drown out the anxiety that slumbers on the bottom of our souls?'⁴⁰ The most resourceful critic would find it difficult to interpret *Klara and Two Men* as a comment on a certain social structure. It is simply about contemporary man's loss of value, loss of sense of direction, loss of self. In speaking about Klíma we sound as if we were speaking about Pinter, Frisch, Arrabel, Beckett.

Café Myriam, written in 1968, is an entertaining black comedy which ostensibly deals with the shortage of places to live. It is perhaps ironic that this most localized of Klíma's plays was performed in the United States⁴¹ where shortage of apartments is certainly not one of the main problems society faces. The author, although he refuted the idea that the play was meant as social criticism – 'I had a lot of fun trying out that black humour for the first time'⁴² – tells us that it was inspired by the desperate shortage of apartments in Czechoslovakia. In a situation where young couples have to wait for six or seven years for an apartment, live in the meantime in cramped conditions with in-laws, and have to pay a horrendous deposit in order to be put on the waiting list, an apartment gradually becomes the focus of dreams and desires. The disastrous psychological consequences for the characters of otherwise harmless and kind people provide the background for *Café Myriam*.

The café sells a 'specialty of the house': delicious cakes in the shape of a mushroom, covered with marzipan and soaked in brandy. Anyone who has visited a mid-European patisserie is familiar with this kind of pastry which is often prepared in bright colours that actually make it look like a beautiful but highly poisonous mushroom, well known to Europeans for its combination of attractiveness and danger. The chief pastrycook of 'Myriam' – a burly muscleman who looks more like a butcher – bakes two kinds of sweet mushrooms: both are equally delicious but one kind is poisonous, causing certain death to the consumer.

A young couple appears in the café, lured by an advertisement that 'Myriam' can provide apartments within a few days for a relatively low price. As the couple try to find out how this splendid proposition works, they are gradually enlightened as to its real nature. Apartment-seekers find an elderly person who has an apartment, establish

³⁸ Ibid 19-21

³⁹ Ibid 7, 17, 27

⁴⁰ Klíma *Theaterstücke* III/5

⁴¹ The play opened (under the title *The Sweetsoppe Myriam*) as a double bill with *Klara and Two Men* (under the title *Klara*) at the Cubicolo Theatre in New York in February 1971. It closed after ten performances.

⁴² Klíma *Theaterstücke* III/7

friendly relations, take him or her for a treat to the pastry shop, attend the funeral a day or two later, and are promptly presented with the papers for the apartment by the efficient manager of Café Myriam.

Not only have the police and the representatives of justice availed themselves of this successful housing service, but a government minister is actually the founder of the establishment. In impassioned speeches he explains to the young couple that it is all being done 'for you, my children, so that you have a roof over your heads. So that you can procreate in peace.' The young man is appalled: 'Can you live where murderers live unpunished? Where the authorities protect the murderers?'⁴³ Admirable ethics, to be sure. But, like the honest Archivist in *The Jury*, Klíma's young man is denied a role of honour. He is carried off on the shoulders of the butcher-cook, cheered by the others as keeping alive the image of purity and idealism so badly needed in this guilt-ridden world to which we all belong. Stunned with what is happening to him, he is integrated into the poisonous production as a holy picture of innocence that punctually revives the theory of guiltlessness while everyone around shares in guilt.

The black comedy here has given another sardonic twist to the theme of *The Jury*. Although we are likely to laugh throughout this vivacious and fast-moving play, the question that forces itself on our minds is no less serious than the one posed by *The Jury*. A system that is able to arrange things in such a way that the most elementary needs of man are presented as privileges has the power to control people to a frightening degree. Moreover, there is an equally frightening power in the pull of togetherness; if everyone does it, it surely can't be all that wrong? Collective guilt, although we have done much talking about it in the last few decades, does not weigh as heavily as individual guilt. In fact, it strangely loses the face of guilt for those who do not want to see it. There is, it turns out, only a short step from the absurd Café Myriam to the great social questions that rock our age.

A Bridegroom for Marcela concentrates openly on the themes of arbitrary guilt, free will, and violence. Again the fable that illustrates these questions is amusing, at least at the start: the quiet clerk Kliment is asked to present himself at a higher office because, he is told, he apparently wants to marry a young woman, Marcela Lukášová, who lives in the same apartment block. This is a complete surprise to Kliment whose connection with the girl is limited to having once helped her with the groceries. Far from having amorous designs on Marcela, he says he has his own girl whom he intends to marry. When he is finally ushered into the office after having had to wait for eight hours in the unheated waiting-room, he is tired, hungry, and cold, but he is certainly not guilty of what he is accused of – namely, having seduced Marcela Lukášová who is now expecting his child.

In the course of the play three officials work on Kliment with methods varying from moralizing rhetoric about conscience and love, to blows and a loaded pistol. At one point they actually bring in the 'bride' who shows obvious signs of a similar official interrogation and considers Kliment no less a stranger than he considers her one. The play ends with Kliment, reduced to a babbling, croaking bundle of wretchedness, collapsing of a heart attack.

The author, who had written the play in feverish haste while on a visit to London during the fateful month of August 1968, felt disappointed on later hearing about the Viennese audience's reaction to the play. Protesting against what they regarded as cynicism and violence, they completely misunderstand its intention. The beatings on stage which had offended their sensibilities were actually quite unimportant. This was proved in the later radio-play version where the author eliminated any reference to physical violence which he considers only a minor aspect of spiritual violence, for 'what could human brutality achieve without the murderous deafness, deadly dissembling and lies which are the forces that activate brutality?'⁴⁴

It would, of course, be easy to interpret the play – particularly if we consider when it was written – as an allegory on the political events of August 1968. But while these events may have provided the momentary impulse, the play is conceived on a deeper level and deals with questions related to the great fables of mental violence of our age, like Ionesco's *The Lesson*, Dürrenmatt's *The Visit*, or Max Frisch's *Andorra*. The core of the play is actually a critique of language used as an instrument of power. Klíma had long been aware of a general and potentially dangerous development, "the increasing distance of words from their original meaning."⁴⁵ We can all think of instances in this cliché-ridden world of ours when the confusion between concepts such as 'conviction' and 'prejudice,' 'conformist' and 'individualist,' 'right' and 'privilege' is such that we throw up our hands at a loss for any word to define the situation. Hamlet still thought himself sure of the difference between cruelty and kindness but he suggested that there is room for switches of meaning and confusion of concepts.

This deep-seated confusion of concepts is Klíma's concern. He regards it not only as 'an instrument of propaganda, as many people superficially believe, but also as an important means to undermine normal human communication – an indispensable postulate for every false image of the world.' The ordinary man in Klíma's play suddenly faces a power that does not accept what is doubtless the truth about his trivial little life. Everything he says is either ignored or turned against him. The truths he wants to communicate are blocked. But they are blocked on purpose. And here we have the basic principle of Klíma's play: 'the purposefully caused impossibility of communication.'⁴⁶

⁴³ *Konditorei Myriam* in Klíma *Theaterstücke* 31, 35 (Czech title: *Kavárna Myriam*)

⁴⁴ Klíma *Theaterstücke* IV/5

⁴⁵ *Ibid* IV/1

⁴⁶ *Ibid*

The usual laws of language and logic have lost their value in the office where Kliment has to account for his life. When he assures the officials that he does not love the woman they want him to marry, he gets a lecture on emotions ‘that beautify human relationships and are a prerequisite for a happy future of all citizens;’ when he tells them that he loves his own girl, he is reminded that the office is not interested in old memories but rather ‘in what you are doing today;’ when he tries logic and argues that, after all, he cannot love the girl they have for him because he does not even know her, he is told that he is ‘emotionally confused;’ when, in the end, exhausted and delirious, he crouches on the floor and calls for ‘one human being ... At least one human being ...’ the officials interpret triumphantly: ‘He is calling for her.’⁴⁷ They mean Marcela, of course.

It is here rather than in *The Castle* that Klíma brings Kafka ‘up to date.’ The conversations in Kafka’s work often give the impression that the other characters speak on a different level from the hero and attach a different meaning to words. This secret change of meaning – a source of irritation and anguish to Kafka’s character – Kafka sees as something mysterious and incomprehensible because the reader shares the hero’s frame of mind with all its suspicions, hopes, and perception of limitations.

Klíma formulates this change in a concrete way: words are used in full awareness of their changed meaning. Take the phrase ‘service to our youth’⁴⁸ repeated by the clientele of *Café Myriam* in several variations. The word ‘service’ here actually means ‘murder.’ Or consider the way the officials who try to find a bridegroom for Marcela use terms designating humanity: ‘We too are human,’ says one official when it is getting late and he wants to go home. ‘Are you even human?’⁴⁹ another asks of Kliment. The words are used in full awareness of their changed meaning. We are reminded of Ionesco’s Professor who uses language literally as a tool to commit murder. ‘After all we are civilized,’ writes Klíma, ‘and know how to humiliate, violate, torture and kill without a single blow, without any noticeable use of force.’⁵⁰

The Double Room, written in 1970, is a farce about a young couple, Roman and Juliet, who have rented a hotel room for a horrendous price in order to be alone together – a luxury which they have never enjoyed during their previous love-making on sofas and floors with relatives sleeping, or not sleeping in the next room. As in *Klara and Two Men* the initial situation ‘finally alone together’ – quickly changes. But instead of the phone calls and a dying man next door, *The Double Room* is invaded by a motley group of people who intend to settle down for the night. The stage becomes a scene of increasing confusion, as characters pour into the room, invade the

bathroom, pull out fold-away beds, beat a big drum (some of them belong to a travelling band), bicker and make passes at Juliet, as her lover looks on helplessly.

Communication between the couple and the intruders is impossible. In this respect the play reminds us of *A Bridegroom for Marcela*. However, unlike the wretched ‘bridegroom,’ the young couple here learn how to use the weapons that are being used by the intruders. By accepting aggressiveness, egotism, lies, and total disrespect for others as the basic rules of conduct between people, they manage to get rid of the whole crowd. Finally they are again alone in their room but their attitude has changed. The night of love can no longer take place. Sitting next to each other on the bed, their faces buried in their hands, they know that they will never be the same again. The author, surprised that one of his friends thought the work his first ‘optimistic’ play,⁵¹ tells us that, on the contrary, he feels this to be ‘the strongest expression of his scepticism,’ because it shows people who overcome their problems by accepting and perpetuating the workings of inhuman surroundings.

With Klíma’s *The Double Room* we have come a fair way from the Kafka with whom we began. Josef K. of *The Trial* had incurred guilt by rejecting in theory but accepting in practice the accusation against him, thus becoming the victim of absurdity, but also its co-creator. The absurdity in that case can crudely be defined as feeling guilt where there is none. Similarly the characters of *The Double Room* are as much the victims as they are the perpetrators of absurdity. However, the absurdity in their case could be crudely defined as refusing to see guilt where there is some.

Thunder and Lightning (1972)⁵² is a hilarious one-act farce about life in one of the many regimented recreational establishments at which totalitarian regimes excel. A number of citizens arrive for what is to be a relaxing holiday at a mountain resort and soon find themselves in situations diametrically opposed to what one imagines by the free and easy holiday spirit. They are forced to take part in classes learning how to make beds according to a certain method; failure to cooperate results in not being given any breakfast, or lunch, for that matter. They are handed out keys with confusing instructions as to which doors they unlock, and soon they find out that the rooms have neither furniture nor water-tight ceilings.

As the audience laugh their way through an hour of fast-moving slapstick they get to know the individual characters: the couple who kotow to any regime; the he-man who volunteers for jobs to impress the ladies rather than for idealistic reasons; the sceptic who resents being pushed around but who backs down when he is reprimanded ‘officially’ through a loudspeaker; the paranoid with the persecution complex who enjoys other people’s fights; the adolescent who translates manuals on sexual behaviour to any female who will lend an ear; the military vacation-group

⁴⁷ *Ein Bräutigam für Marcella* in Klíma *Theaterstücke* 15, 25, 29; (Czech title: *Ženích pro Marcelu*)

⁴⁸ *Konditorei Myriam* 16

⁴⁹ *Ein Bräutigam* 21, 26

⁵⁰ Klíma *Theaterstücke* IV/5

⁵¹ *Ibid* IV/7

⁵² Klíma *Blitz und Donner* tr Gerhard and Alexandra Baumrucker (BärenreiterVerlag Schauspielertrieb, mimeographed; Kassel n. d.)

leader who mouths completely arbitrary and absurd rules and regulations with a gospel teacher's intensity and a robot's mechanistic phraseology.

From the first moment the audience know that the vacationers are bound for disaster. As the speed of the action increases, a thunderstorm begins to roar outside and the group leader assigns the vacationers to a variety of incredible jobs, such as holding up the lightning rod on the roof or the grounding cable near the oil-storage and handing out rubber-soled boots and notebooks for meteorological notations for greater efficiency. When, after a terrible clap of thunder and a flash of lightning, one of the characters comes staggering onto the stage with singed clothes to call for help because lightning has struck, the leader of the group cannot be found. He has departed with the most attractive of the lady-vacationers to provide her with refuge and holiday pleasure in his sheltered villa in the valley, which has not only a swimming pool but also a canopy-bed and a lightning-rod.

The message is clear: the rules are arbitrary and exist for their own sake; truth, as the cynical saying goes, has been buried so deep that no one can find it; people who have come to escape routine and seek freedom and play find another form of regimentation; people's sense of guilt is used as a lever for any action; crass rule of power masquerades as objectivity; the slogan 'equal opportunity' provides a smoke screen for arbitrariness, favouritism, and force alike.

An East European audience – which, of course, has not seen the play – would obviously savour the basic situation portrayed in *Thunder and Lightning* in an active way because the play derives its humour from vast exaggerations – but not necessarily distortions – of the reality they know. A Western audience could enjoy the high-spirited theatrics and, on a more thoughtful level, they would be bound to recognize certain aspects of their own lives. The implication, for example, that a place of pleasure can quickly engulf those who are taking care of it in unpleasant, harrasing, and even dangerous tasks might strike a bell for many people, from the weekend cottager to the owner of a sailboat or a coin collection.

Here again a startling thought wedges its way through the argument. The audience of Eastern Europe has someone to blame for the characters' predicament. Their reactions – lucid recognition of parallels to reality, informed amusement, pleasure in seeing on stage the revelation of unmentionable topics – will be anything but ambiguous. The Western audience, if indeed they recognize the threads that lead to their own lives, will be puzzled and perhaps none too comfortable. Kafka, even in fancy dress, is never comfortable.

But then again, as Topol's Věna puts it: 'That's not inclination. That's life.' Kafka's Joseph K. would have liked this quotation. So, surprisingly, would many twentieth century dramatic characters who are put by their authors into situations where accepting and perpetuating – or stopping to question but then carrying on – has become their chief concern. Herr Everyman of Max Frisch's *The Fire Raisers* has as much claim to this as Beckett's Winnie from *Happy Days*.

*Games*⁵³ was written in 1973 and translated into German from the typescript (the playwright made some changes to the Czech original while the translation was taking place). Here Klíma takes up the theme of guilt and innocence in yet a new way. As was apparent in the four black comedies, the initial atmosphere of the play seems miles away from Kafka's world. However, while the characters play the 'games' announced in the title, a dark, threatening reality begins to emerge from the cheerful surface like a terrifying monster from the bubbling waves of a peaceful lake.

Again the play revolves around the concepts of right and wrong, freedom and justice, but the lattice-work of guilt and innocence is much more complex than in Klíma's earlier plays. For example, while the 'victim' in *The Jury* or *A Bridegroom for Marcela* was clearly innocent, Kamil Sova, the man who is about to be hanged innocently at the end of *Games*, is partly a volunteer with complex motivations, partly a relativist, and partly an uneasy cross between idealism and resignation whose active imagination makes him sympathize as much with the average citizen who pulls the wool over his own eyes as with the revolutionary who believes 'We must buy weapons, print books, influence world opinion.'⁵⁴

However, despite this seemingly undramatic complexity, *Games* shows Klíma's dramatic genius at its best. The action consists of a group of people meeting at a friend's house for an evening of games. The friendly hostess, Irena, had thought it would be nice to invite a few people and 'just play games rather than talk about politics and such awful things.' – 'You know, ' she explains to the guest who arrives first, "simply forget that we are grown-ups and that the whole ugly world pushes itself on us.'⁵⁵ Gradually the other guests arrive and several games are played – though with resistance for various reasons by the people taking part.

There are six games: three in the first act and three in the second. The scenes are named after the particular games: Meddling, Charades, Taking Hostages, Court Procedures, Spiritual Affinities, and Execution. The games become increasingly sinister and dangerous. Imperceptibly, while all kinds of fun are choreographed on the stage and the audience are brilliantly entertained, they are made to witness how a game turns into reality, how guilt and innocence are judged arbitrarily, how the past of each participant comes into play and changes the nature of the game, how the elusive phenomenon of implicit guilt becomes more frightening than a real, explicit crime, how a henchman and a victim are found and accepted, and how each character plays his or her part in the general destruction of justice.

Again the characters are a cross-section of modern society. There is the perfect hostess and excellent cook, Irena, the naive inventor of the disastrous games idea, a sentimental, motherly woman who would not harm a fly but who, if something terrible is happening close by, bends over her salad bowl, slicing and measuring,

⁵³ Klíma *Spiele* tr Gerhard and Alexandra Baumrucker (Bärenreiter-Verlag Schauspielvertrieb, mimeographed; Kassel n. d.)

⁵⁴ *Ibid* 57

⁵⁵ *Ibid* 7

paying meticulous attention to the delicate balance of the ingredients. Obviously she is too busy to notice anything else. Besides, although she knows that ‘fate is evil,’ she is also convinced that ‘we people are not.’

Her husband Filip, a former judge, is haunted by the accusing ghosts of his past verdicts. He cannot stand games in which people are blind-folded and the thought of loaded guns makes him shiver. When, during the charades, he is made to represent the Statue of Liberty (incidentally a dramatically brilliant and hilarious scene), no one is able to recognize his representation of freedom. In a later game, he prefers to act the Court Attendant who simply ushers people in and out and watches the proceedings as an outsider who is not responsible for anything.

During the last game, the Execution, however, he is once again cast in the role of the legal authority who reads out the verdict. This time he takes on the part with gusto because it gives him the opportunity to deliver an impassioned speech in which he claims that the position of a judge ‘is nothing but a codified form of injustice because it serves power and not justice’; he confesses, ‘I tell you, I have known for a long time that whenever I put on legal robes I become an actor who can do nothing but improvise.’ And he continues, telling his listeners about the throngs of persecuted people of all times who died on galleys, in exile, in gas chambers, on the gallows, in ditches; as he sees this mass of people moving toward him, huge and relentless, he knows that there is no way out but to repeat his initial verdict, to judge them, ‘to judge again, once again, to condemn those innocent ones, because they are the ones who call most passionately for a justice that does not exist.’⁵⁶

Among the guests is the fat and prosperous Deml, who can afford a beautiful young actress for a mistress. It is Deml whose past, as the games reveal more and more clearly, is the truly criminal one. He has murdered a young woman whose body he disposed of in a garbage truck. But this crime seems melodramatic, crass, and unreal amidst the complex games of right and wrong. As the surface of the game cracks and Deml’s murderous past comes to light, his crime seems like a decoy, realistic yet unreal, somehow out of step with the vast dimensions of the rest of the play.

Eva, his mistress, is the most enthusiastic game-playing guest. Apart from sexual games, which she plays to perfection, she likes any game at all. She eagerly acts any part, from charade guesser, to hijacked passenger, to prosecuting attorney, to henchman’s assistant. She does it all with panache, finds everything fascinating, and does not mind much which of the other eligible males she will seduce the next evening – the muscleman or the bookworm.

The former, Jacob, is an avid sportsman who flies around the world wherever his team is sent, who communicates in the clipped sentences of the sports ‘pro,’ who acts the witness for the prosecution with the same slow-witted pedantry with which he does muscle-building exercises ‘according to the Kaiserschad-Kowalski method.’⁵⁷

His opposite, Peter, a thoughtful scientist, cool and collected behind the book he insists on reading most of the evening, is the ironic observer of the cruel ways and games of man. His occasional aphorisms reveal him as the author’s spiritual kin: he remarks that ‘not only he who carries out violence serves its purpose but also he who submits to it;’ or else he refers to ‘judgments which will be made only years later. Or centuries later, or never.’ It is Peter who plays the Judge during the trial of the real crime, who knows whenever anyone plays the part best suited to him, who, after having asked in vain whether anyone wants to hear the verdict before they hang an innocent man, draws the conclusion which makes up the last words of the play: ‘They don’t hear me. How very busy they are.’⁵⁸

Then there is Bauer, a nondescript bully of fifty, who becomes sociable only when he talks about guns or tells stories from his own – if we are to believe him – colourful past. Chagall, he claims, once gave him one of his priceless paintings just as a small tit-for-tat gesture; or Duke Schwarzenberg shared his bunk during their internment in the fifties. It appears that Bauer ‘made always good,’ as he would put it himself in his crude lingo. Fascinated by the loaded gun which he has detected on the wall, he begins to handle it playfully and soon wields it with much pleasure and know-how, whether acting the part of a Revolutionary or a member of the State Militia. The last game, Execution, is Bauer’s own idea, and he organizes and casts it with great efficiency. At the end it is Bauer who gives the command for the hanging which is interrupted, not by anyone shouting ‘Stop it!’ as the guests had hopefully imagined, but by the falling curtain. The audience will never know the end of the game.

Last but not least there is Kamil Sova, a gentle homespun philosopher who is the first guest to arrive. He is intrigued by Madame Irena’s salads from the culinary as much as from the philosophical point of view (because he realizes that the relationship of certain ingredients and how they affect each other could be transferred to an abstract argument of values with most revealing results). Sova – incidentally the only character who has both a first and a last name – is rather a poor actor but he has a lot of imagination. Too much, in fact. He has imagined what it is like to be a prisoner, what a man feels before he is executed, how one would talk to a man before he goes to his death; he used to dream of being a revolutionary but somehow he has lost the belief that the world can be changed. The ingredients are such that the salad – or the world – is bound to turn out to be of a certain kind.

But it is Sova who recognizes the symbol of freedom even in its most awkwardly represented form: Filip impersonating the Statue of Liberty. Sova’s roles, we realize, probably run parallel to the roles he played in his real life. They progress from an idealistic hijacker (who has written books like ‘On Truth, Justice, and its Enemies’) to witness for the defence of a real criminal, to innocent victim at the Execution. However, as his hands are tied, he lifts them into the air and calls out his own credo of freedom: ‘These are not the worst fetters. Power and false beliefs put us into much

⁵⁶ Ibid 132-3, 134

⁵⁷ Ibid 142

⁵⁸ Ibid 96,115,144. (The German translation varies from the Czech original, which has been followed here.)

tighter chains.’ To be chained and rendered helpless is for Sova ‘an extraordinary experience ... only now do I become aware of its [the world’s] real dimension ... all of a sudden, by means of this (lifts his tied hands) I feel unified with all those who perhaps have not even a notion that their hands are tied too.’ As he climbs the improvised scaffold, appealing to his friends not to abandon an innocent man to the henchman’s hands, Peter, the commentator, raises his eyes from his book: ‘He acts brilliantly! Finally he has found the part that’s right for him.’⁵⁹

If in *The Double Room* Kafka was turned inside out, in *Games* he is conjured up. As Kafka’s seemingly innocuous corridors, offices, pubs, or studies become threatening places where dark forms of guilt are relentlessly revealed, so the cosy living room where a hostess welcomes her guests for an evening of fun gradually turns into a solemn court of justice – a grim place of execution. Kafka’s haunting metamorphosis of an average young man into a giant beetle is at work in Klíma’s play: a sex bomb becomes the henchman’s helper; a kind-hearted matron, who would unlock the chains of any prisoner if she got the chance, becomes an indifferent witness of brutality; a judge becomes a robot; an academic becomes a policeman. Kafka’s salesman had changed into the beetle in his sleep before the story started. In Klíma’s case the metamorphosis takes place before our very eyes; when we realize what has happened, it is too late. The deformation has taken place. The one man who has not joined the general behaviour is isolated and stares in horror at his fellow men.

Klíma’s Kamil Sova⁶⁰ expresses three emotions when he mounts the scaffold at the end of the play and the end of the ‘Game’: horror of his fellow men, conviction that he is innocent, and regret about the loss of human dignity. ‘It is all so undignified!’⁶¹ are his last words. It was Kafka who spent his life drawing for us a meticulously graphic picture of modern man’s loss of dignity, of his deformation into performing mechanized functions, of his loss of human consciousness. Jan Grossman, calling Kafka ‘the first poet of automatization of the modern world,’ put it in these words: ‘Dostoevsky’s characters are people subdued by deformation who strive against it. In Kafka’s case the main character is deformation itself which still keeps its human likeness and strives against humanity.’⁶²

In 1974 Klíma and Kohout decided to dramatize Kafka’s novel *Amerika*, six years after the Prague Spring and after all creative voices except those who completely adhered to the Communist party line had been silenced. Theirs was a poignant attempt once more to illuminate – literally, put into the limelight – Kafka’s prophetic and, in the most basic sense of the word, political vision of the horrendous danger of man’s automatization. The danger can manifest itself in the organized murder of people or in – a spiritual kind of murder – the organized destruction of human individuality

and dignity. From *The Castle* to *The Jury*, from *Amerika* to *Games*, this realization is the deep bond between Kafka and Klíma’s work.

In: Goetz-Stankiewicz, Marketa: *The Silence Theatre*. Toronto – Buffalo – London, 1979.

⁵⁹ Ibid 57, 108, 112, 139

⁶⁰ The anagram Kamil/Klíma implies that the author identified here with his character.

⁶¹ *Games* 144

⁶² Grossman ‘Kafkova divadelnost’ 9