

THE YELLOW ROOM IN THE PENAL COLONY

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I have recommended *In the Penal Colony* to young men and teenagers as a point of departure and discovery of Kafka. But to be honest, I never liked the story; it was too cold, cruel and violent, and I didn't see the point of it. That has changed, thanks to *The Insurance Man: Kafka in the Penal Colony* at Simon Fraser University's Art Gallery. I stand enlightened, better versed in the historical, cultural, and visceral context, the cauldron that produced the creative environment for this peculiar story. Created by SFU Professor Emeritus Jerry Zaslove with help from Art Gallery Director and Curator Bill Jeffries, their engaging installation, at times playful and whimsical, and then starkly serious, revealed how Kafka's life experiences, the materials he read, the events he witnessed, and unique views of the world he inhabited, inspired the creation of *In the Penal Colony*.

It is essential to understand who Franz Kafka was as a human being in order to understand what he wrote. *The Insurance Man: Kafka in the Penal Colony* took me by the hand through a multi-dimensional artistic, literary, autobiographical and decidedly theatrical art installation, a metaphorical slice of Kafka's life. Zaslove masterfully combined a rich lifetime's gathering of materials, photographs, related historical and archival documents, and interspersed the story text with Kafka's diaries and letters to the effect that his world and his literary creation intersect, all bathed in a warm yellow glow.

As a biographer, I know the joy of finding documents, objects, images that my subjects have seen, touched, felt. Zaslove and Jeffries' collaboration recreated that sense of exploration. Finding one of Dora's postcards in a cabinet drawer, I was again thrilled by the discovery and its connectedness to Kafka and Dora. The icing on the cake was the audio presentation of Kafka's story-fable, available on earphones, offering the opportunity to listen to it immersed and surrounded by context.

Kafka died in 1924, virtually unknown outside the literary circles in Prague, Vienna and Berlin. In his meteoric posthumous rise to literary sainthood, Kafka became the most influential, yet profoundly misunderstood figures of our time. Zaslove said he wants to break the spell of the mystifications around Kafka as a writer, and it's a noble, a necessary goal. For the misunderstandings surrounding Kafka are pervasive. Despite the designation as a father of the modern novel, dozens of biographies, and tens of thousands of books of critical analysis, most people remain unfamiliar with him. The prevailing image of Kafka as morose, alienated and lonely, stands in stark contrast to the extraordinary man described by those who knew and loved him as amusing and kind, usually cheerful, a born playmate, always ready for a joke.

Kafka's powerful literary themes, which earned their own adjective, have overshadowed his life, and he has been reduced to a caricature, a composite of his autobiographical but fictional protagonists. Complicating the confusion, scholars and academics over the past 75 years have formulated countless plausible theories, written dissertations and published essays about Kafka's literary intentions and meaning, building their cases on everything from schizophrenia to homosexuality. Even the Kafka Museum in Prague seems to further that dark impression. The atmospheric museum of narrow rooms, low ceilings and dim light reinforces the supposed gloomy life of Kafka.

In contrast, in the exhibit at SFU Art Gallery,

lemon colored light illuminated the morbid and inhuman realities that Kafka wanted to resolve.

The light at the gallery entrance and throughout the exhibit was warm and welcoming. A palm tree in a corner placed us in the South Seas, where penal colonies existed during Kafka's lifetime. Remember Devil's Island? Drawn in by the theatrical trunk and costumes, the photographs of Kafka's contemporaries, the writing on the walls, I was led around the room, identifying the ingredients which led to Kafka's literary endeavor. According to Kafka's last love, Dora Diamant, understanding the motivation for Kafka's writing was at the core of understanding Kafka. The point of his writings, it seemed to her, was that he "resolved... conflict through art, the best method he possessed for bringing order in to the world."¹

If the 20th century was riddled with what Max Brod, Kafka's biographer and literary executor called "the inevitable distortion of his image"² the 21st century is being kinder, and more accurate to the understanding of the man whose "scribblings" have been absorbed by nearly every culture and have inspired artists and writers as varied as Jorge Luis Borges, Joyce Carol Oates, William Burroughs, Susan Sontag, Phillip Roth, Haruki Murakami, Jose Saramago, Gabriel Garcia Marquez and Zadie Smith.

In the second edition of his biography of Kafka, Brod commented on the acrimonious academic debate surrounding Kafka's work. "One can hardly survey the gigantic essay literature that is concerned with Kafka," which "contains ... very many absurdities and contradictions.... Only the externals of Kafka's methods have been imitated or analyzed, but not his essential endeavor."³ By producing an artistic environment that exposes Kafka's essential endeavor, the desire to resolve horror with art, Jerry Zaslove and Bill Jeffries have taken a significant step in academic rectification of "the inevitable distortions." For this Kafka students and scholars everywhere should be grateful.

1 Robert, Marthe. "Notes inedites de Dora Dymant sur Kafka." *Evidences* (Paris) 28 (November 1952). Translation by Anthony Rudolf in "Kafka and The Doll." *Jewish Chronicle Literary Supplement* (London), June 15, 1984, vii.

2 Brod, Max. *Franz Kafka: A biography*. New York: Schocken, 1963, 213-214

3 Ibid.