

# Franz Kafka, Yiddish Theatre and Modern Stage

## Artistic Affinity of Actor's Figure, Gestures, and Drawings

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“... in what theatre are you playing?” (Der Prozess)

Franz Kafka's encounter with Yitzchak Löwy (1911–12), Yiddish theatre, and Yiddish language has often been regarded in the context of his quest for his Jewish roots and his Jewish identity (Shahar 2004). However, numerous studies related to the brief episode in Kafka's life vary in their emphasis. They range from the attention paid by Walter Benjamin to Kafka's use of gestures, to Evelyn Torton Beck's study devoted to the Yiddish plays Kafka witnessed, Hartmut Binder's analysis of various types of body language, Martin Puchner's claim about Kafka's antitheatricality, to Klaus Mladek's performative gestures connected with the legal process and Mark Anderson's exploration of sartorial aspects in Kafka's texts. Others (Shahar, Baioni) illuminate artistic and historic background of Kafka's interest in the actor and examine some aspects of Judaism relevant to this context.

Based on Kafka's diverse discourse types: private (diary entries, and letters) and public (a talk, and published fiction), as well as his drawings I intend to show that Kafka's observations about the actor and his troupe resonate with his awareness of visual means of expressions expressed in his prose and his drawings. Moreover, as I argue here Kafka's fascination with the actor capture gestures, postures, and movements that call to mind Craig's theory of *Übermarionette*, Maeterlinck's plays for the puppets, Oskar Schlemmer's *Triadisches Ballet* to name but a few examples of the concurrent transformations of subjects into objects and vice versa e.g., dolls, marionettes or moving statues performed on stage and page.

### 1. CONTEXT: JEWS IN VIENNA, BERLIN, AND PRAGUE

When examining Jews in Vienna at the turn of the twentieth century historian Klaus Hödl concludes: “The conception that an understanding of culture can be achieved by analysing practices rather than textual articulations was taken, among other fields, from the world of theater.” (Hödl 2008: 52) He also sees a transfer of the “religious sphere onto the secular Yiddish stage.” He claims that “the Yiddish theater may be regarded as a substitute for religious service. Jews who used to find pleasure in the singing and preaching in the synagogue could now enjoy them at the theater.” (Hödl 2008: 60). Hödl quotes David Pinsky who lists among “the eastern European Jews three different kinds of diversion: the magid (preacher), the cantor, and the paajatz (clown). All three of them came to be incorporated in the Yiddish theater.” (Hödl 2008: 60)

By contrast, the Jewish religious practices in Prague were mostly limited to high holidays, the knowledge of Hebrew was often restricted to the portion, they had to read for their bar mitzvahs. Hence, it is doubtful that the experience of the religious community might have been a source of enjoyment in Prague with her various opportunities for entertainment including thriving German and Czech theatre<sup>1</sup> culture. Moreover, the Jewish quarter, Josefov, the fifth district of Prague conjured by Guillaume Apollinaire (*Le Passant de Prague*, 1910) and Gustav Meyrink (*Der Golem*, 1913/14) had 'been sanitized' in the decades between the 1890s and 1920s. With the buildings, the substratum of what has been regarded as locus of Jewish culture faded away as well. Because of Josefov's so-called *asanace* the Jews of Prague lost their material connection to the past. Although several synagogues remained new buildings replaced those houses in which the fictional worlds of German and Czech Jewish tales were set and some phantastic novels took place (Marion Crawford, Jiří Karásek, Gustav Meyrink). Czech and German theatre in Prague did not perform Yiddish plays, nor did they stage many plays about Jews.<sup>2</sup> Hence, it will come as no surprise, that the Jews in Prague were barely familiar with theatre by Jews about Jews and for Jews.

The city lacked the lived experience of Berlin and Vienna,<sup>3</sup> and their bustling Jewish culture in the respective Jewish quarters that produced various genres of theatre. In both cities artists of Yiddish background who moved towards the West to avoid pogroms in the East were set apart from their 'host' culture by their language (Yiddish has been often considered a mere 'jargon'), appearance, and manners. "The actual expression 'Ostjude' became widespread only in the early 20th century, but all its characteristics - negative and positive - had been delineated earlier under different names. Although there were exceptions, East European Jews were generally considered to be 'loud, coarse, and dirty.'" (Aschheim 2008: 61) Paradoxically, many of them became well-respected artists bringing with them the Chassidic tradition of chants and dances mentioned above. The career of the actor Alexander Granach (1890–1945) at the *Deutsches Theater* in Berlin exemplifies such a development (Geisel 1981: 106f.): "The immense vitality of Eastern Judaism streamed out of him, out of his curious eyes and his emphasised movements, out of the words that poured in a raucous voice from a drunken mouth." (Shahar 2004: 223)<sup>4</sup>

Often, however, because of their alleged use of the so-called jargon, i.e., Yiddish their works were a priori mocked as *schund* (trash). That was the case in Vienna, where Arthur Holitscher's play *Der Golem. Eine Ghettolegende* (1908) although written in German and praised for its poetic quality (Zweig 1915)<sup>5</sup> was criticized for its Jewish topic and the suspected use of Yiddish.<sup>6</sup>

1 The Czech National Theater built in 1881 and restored after a devastating fire in 1883. The New German Theater was opened 1888. (Ludvová 2012).

2 Two plays by Josef J. Kolár (*Pražský žid* [The Jew of Prague], 1872) and Jaroslav Vrchlický (*Rabínská moudrost* [Rabbinic wisdom], 1886) announced Jewish topics in their titles. They show Jews as respected members of the Czech society, disclosing the prejudices toward the Jews.

3 Lothar Müller (2007) mentions the traits of various Jewish theatres in these cities and beyond.

4 Shahar refers to Bronen's (1967: 23) observation (Shahar 2004: 224).

5 Holitscher's book on America (Holitscher 2013) provided Kafka source material for his novel about America.

6 Incidentally, Paul Wegener's Golem films which were also set in an imaginary ghetto albeit evoking Prague and the historic characters of the emperor Rudolf II and Rabbi Loew became an example of

## 2. “PERIPATETIC YIDDISH ACTORS” IN PRAGUE: YITZCHAK LÖWY AS A GUIDE THROUGH JEWISH WORLD

It will come as a surprise that according to Kafka’s biographer, Ernst Pawel, the “Yiddish theatre that visited Prague and performed in a “sleazy Prague café” (Pawel 1984: 240) was Kafka’s “most memorable theatrical experiences.” Yet Pawel uses the attribute mediocre for the theatre, the plays, and the “peripatetic Yiddish actors” and claims that the “language, he [Kafka] could barely understand.” (Pawel 1984: 140) But Pawel also claims:

The artists came from Lemberg<sup>7</sup> and had prestige since the first permanent Yiddish theatre in Europe was founded there. The troupe performed plays by Avrom Goldfaden, Jacob Gordin, Joseph Lateiner, Avrom Mikhl Sharkansky, Sigmund Feinman, and Moyshe Richter, preceded by a variety of Yiddish songs, couplets, and jokes. (Pawel 1984: 59)

Hence, with respect to Jewish culture and religion, Löwy’s theatre seems to have moved from the centre of Yiddish culture (Lemberg or Lviv) to the province, namely Prague.

Like many Prague Jews (Holländer 1998), Franz Kafka and Max Brod attended theatre regularly and were well acquainted with the art of German and Czech stages. Brod, himself a playwright, and critic embraced and popularized Leoš Janáček’s music, and dramatized Jaroslav Hašek’s novel *Osudy dobrého vojáka Švejka* [The Fortunes of Good Soldier Švejk] (1921–23). Although his adaptation reveals a rather conventional approach to theatre, he considered the Yiddish theatre not “schund” (Bechtel 2010: 78). On the contrary, his review for the influential *Prager Tagblatt* Brod on October 27, 1911, emphasizes that the audience in Prague could see important plays in Yiddish otherwise performed only in big theatres abroad. He extends the present experience by pointing out that the guests embody what he calls *Volkskunst*, claiming that they link antique tradition of religious ceremony with the naivete inherent in the ancient conventions.

However, some of the reactions to Löwy were disparaging, although not necessarily for aesthetic reasons. First, the strange popular performance might have had clashed with the tradition of high culture as well as encounter the contemporary aversion toward the Ost-Juden shared in the Austro-Hungarian monarchy and beyond. Yet, Hans Kohn, later a well-respected theorist of nationalism describes in the Zionist *Selbstwehr* the well-attended evening in which the group presented Avram Shakransky’s play *Kol Nidre* about the Spanish inquisition (Kohn 1911; Pawel 1984: 247). Beck calls it “a drama of intrigue” (Beck 1971: 98) that focuses on the persecution of Jews, a topical issue at that time.

Kafka, as his diaries and letters testify approached the Jewish question with curiosity. He was well acquainted with a wide range of popular culture: variety-shows,

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classic silent German cinema, showcasing actors of the Max Reinhardt theatre. Some considered the film antisemitic (e.g., Bartow, Wudka). However, two of the actors Lyda Salmonova (1889–1968) and Ernst Deutsch (1890–1969) connected the film to the contemporary Prague. Deutsch, who played Rabbi Loew’s fictional Famulus could be considered prime example of German expressionist acting. Native of Prague Deutsch, left Prague for Berlin. After the war, in 1951, a theatre in Hamburg was named after him.

7 On Lemberg as a centre of Jewish culture, see Bechtel (2006).

circus, cinema as well as contemporary interest in folklore in fine art and literature. On December 25, 1911, he notes his disappointment with Jaroslav Vrchlický's drama *Hippodamie* he attended shortly after its premiere at the National Theater in Prague.<sup>8</sup> Kafka calls it a "bad play," somewhat randomly derivative of Greek sources, he finds even a good production of it "nothing but an imitation of Reinhardt" (Jamison 2018: 29). Mentioning Max Reinhardt is noteworthy because it shows Kafka's knowledge of both the leading stages in Berlin and Prague and his keen interest in cinema and theatre as is obvious from a lengthy part of his letter to Felice Bauer, his fiancé, written on March 5, 1913. Based on a poster announcing the film *Der Andere* (The Other, 1913)<sup>9</sup> Kafka anticipated a mediocre acting starring Reinhardt's actor Albert Bassermann whose performance in Hamlet he had admired. Yet he critiques famously the film based on a poster, a photograph of the actor that led him to the negative verdict. By contrast, he shared his enthusiasm for the Yiddish theatre in a letter he wrote to Felice on November 3, 1912: "I love the Yiddish theatre; last year I may have gone to twenty of their performances, and possibly not once to the German theatre." (Kafka 1973: 126)

This reaction might come as a surprise, especially because Doctor Kafka, a sophisticated theatregoer, not only attended numerous performances in the then shabby Café Savoy but also documented his encounters with Yitzchak Löwy the Yiddish theatre, and the Yiddish language in diverse discourse types.

Alas, very few pictures have been preserved, yet Kafka's description in his diary captures at least glimpses of Löwy's performance:

He steps forward only a little, opens his eyes wide, plucks at his straight black coat with his absent-minded left hand and holds the right out to us, open and large. And we are supposed, even if we are not gripped, to acknowledge that he is gripped and to explain to him how the misfortune, which has been described, was possible. (January 7, 1912; Kafka 1948: 222; see also Massino 2016).

Kafka conjures here the visual impact of Löwy's acting as a process of activating the audience by using gestures, postures, and movements, that present an actor's figure rather than representing a specific character. Kafka's description of Löwy's performance evokes Jan Mukařovský's notion of Chaplin's stage/actor's figure [herecká postava] defined as the "visual aspects of the stage figure" that consist of two groups: "1. expressive gestures, poses, and facial expressions; and 2. movements that change the figure's relationship to scenic space." (Quinn 1989: 78f.)

Akin to Chaplin's gestures that are the dominant of his performance Löwy's acting is set in a sparingly decorated space, which as Kafka notes is reduced to a minimum, hence, drawing the spectator's attention to the actor. Moreover, the *mise-èn-scène* does not represent a specific space but leaves it largely to the spectator's imagination to create the fictional world in his mind's eye. The acting style foregrounds the transformation of the actor to the figure he presents based on "theatrical gestures reminiscent of angular expressionist paintings and later German expressionist acting." (Bechtel 2010: 90)

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8 Premiered on December 17, 1911.

9 *The Other* (German: *Der Andere*) is a 1913 German directed by Max Mack and starring Albert Besserman.

## GESTURES IN KAFKA'S TEXTS

Kafka is obviously less interested in the dramatic text and more in the variety of Löwy's performative techniques. By the same token, as Binder suggests, Kafka's gesture does not "double a word that accompanies the conversation but is a word of as it were an independent language of movements" (Binder 2016: 134). Often the enigmatic movements, gestures and words seem to create a scenic collage.

Kafka's gestural language in his prose also distorts the body, as well as disjoins the actions, and leaves the interpretation to the reader prompted to unravel the ambiguous meaning of titles like a trial or the process (i.e., progression), castle or lock<sup>10</sup>, the ambiguous meaning of *Verwandlung* either of the travelling agent Gregor Samsa or his family.

Yet, reminiscent of puppets, dolls, or ordinary objects the figures are repeatedly set into seemingly unmotivated situations incongruous with other linguistic or visual signs of a fragmented almost cubist fictional world. And as Ritchie Robertson concludes it remains "obscure what the gestures and expressions actually mean." (Robertson 2004: 52)

## YITZCHAK LÖWY AS A GUIDE THROUGH JEWISH WORLD

Kafka promoted Löwy with a talk at an evening at the Jewish Townhall on February 12, 1912. By introducing Löwy's artistic expressions as an actor, he revealed his own sensibility as a spectator and his ability to detect the inherent features of modern performance in Löwy's stage figure despite /or because/ his presentation appears to have violated the contemporary aesthetic and social norms.

Yet, Löwy might have served Kafka as a genuine guide through a world strange to his guests. He addressed the apprehension of the invited audience, their "dread of Yiddish, dread mingled with a certain fundamental distaste" (Kafka, quoted in Anderson 1989: 263). Such a disgust appears to have been expressed by Kafka's father when he quipped about his son's strange visitor: "He who lies down with dogs gets up with fleas." (Pawel 1984: 246) Close to the antisemitic slur of *schmutzige Jude* that does not necessarily refer to deficient personal hygiene (even though it might have been applicable) Herman Kafka's dismissive judgement about Löwy as much as his absence at the talk must have offended his son. The note in Kafka's diary that merely states his parents' absence might imply his hurt feelings. This incident indicates, a clash of generations, the contrast between father and son with respect to the foreign visitors. While the older Kafka endorsed the contempt toward the Ostjuden his son tried to create a bridge to them, to bring the two groups together. He was doing it not by extolling Yiddish<sup>11</sup> and its semantic values but by acknowledging the paradox of the fear he presumed the audience experienced:

10 Jamison quotes Stanley Corngold's comment on homonymies which he calls "invalids" that lead to "pathological conflicts" (Jamison 2018: 110).

11 "In 1911, he is going to the Yiddish theatre and understanding what is said, but Yiddish is not a language he encounters very often in his family or his daily life; it remains an import from the east that is compelling and strange." (Butler 2011: 6)

[...] once Yiddish has taken hold of you and moved you – and Yiddish is everything, the words, the Chasidic melody, and the essential character of this Eastern European Jewish actor himself – you will have forgotten your former reserve. Then you will come to feel the true unity of Yiddish, and so strongly that it will frighten you, yet it will no longer be fear of Yiddish but of yourselves. (Kafka, quoted in Anderson 1989: 266)

For Kafka Yiddish appears to be more than a means of verbal communication since his proficiency was most likely as limited as that of the Jews who came to see Löwy: “They could follow the acting, however, because the performers expressed the meaning they wanted to convey through performative acts, i.e., through the employment of their bodies. What they spoke was not as important as their movements” (Hödl 2008: 62). The subordinate position of the text on stage changed the hierarchy of the performance elements: stage directions, and *mise-en-scène*, became less important than the actor’s figure and its relationship with the audience.

Kafka embraced the jargon not as a threat but as a means of self-discovery and what Delphine Bechtel calls “cross-cultural hybridization” (Bechtel 2010: 93). Besides, the migrations and variations of the Jewish theatre were as multicultural as they were also plurimedial inspired by popular entertainment such as circus and cabaret (Shahar 2004: 226) that soon permeated the performances of the *avant-garde*. They question the firm norms of several languages and cultures. Kafka was able to capture in the Yiddish theatre its multitude of expressions transformed into conventions of modern stages that have been incorporated into the frayed tapestry of modernity emerging in the *semiosphere* (Lotman 2005) of Prague before the Great war. Thus, Löwy’s theatre was less a substitute for religious service but a prefiguration of the modern stage. Accordingly, the relationship of the two artists appears as one of kindred spirits that evokes the close connection between popular and so-called high culture, which later became typical of the *avantgarde* (Bürger 1984).

### 3. YIDDISH THEATRE AND ITS PRESUMED INFLUENCE ON KAFKA’S WORK.

Beck asserts that: “[...] in matters of style, theme, structure, and characterization, Kafka’s imaginative prose was substantially influenced by the Jewish plays brought to Prague by the wandering Jewish actors” (Beck 1971: X).<sup>12</sup> More specifically, Beck implies that Kafka’s work after 1911 shows echoes of the Yiddish plays (Beck 1971: 70 and 170f.). She considers Kafka’s change of style beginning with the short story *Das Urteil* (The Judgement, 1912). Yet, the relationship between Kafka’s work and the Yiddish theatre appears to be more complex than the notion of unilateral influence.

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12 As Beck observed in *Process* “the ordering of its chapters, remains uncertain” (Beck 1971: 170). In fact, the newly edited manuscript underwent changes after 1971 when her book was published, and the modified book no longer shows the supposedly dramatic structure of Brod’s edition. Consequently, as it applies to most of Kafka’s texts edited by Brod the revised version cautions the contemporary readers to compare the current editions with texts on which the respective scholarship was based.



Moreover, the suggested causal relation between the Yiddish theatre and Kafka's work also requires reconsideration because many elements like postures, gestures and grotesque movements appear already in *Beschreibung eines Kampfes* (Description of a Struggle) written in 1904–07 (version A) and 1909–11 (version B). For instance, in the introductory paragraph the hostess makes “graceful bowing movements, causing the dainty folds in her skirt to move up and down” (Kafka 1993: 253).<sup>13</sup>

Kafka foregrounds the visual features of these figures, their treatment of objects and their transformations. The characters are caught in a situation midway, their actions are often not motivated or lacking a connection with each other, they appeal to the recipient's imagination to co-create the spectacle, to participate. The words seem to be close to stage directions in a prompt book, to be projected onto the spectator's mind's eye, to organize (blocking) actors in the evanescent complex mise-en-scène. The grotesque situations reminiscent of cinematic takes (e.g., when walking over the bridge and calling the vultures) appear to translate moving images into capricious vignettes.

Moreover, the notion of theatre is evoked as well as in Kafka's other works by the many spectators who appear in the least expected places and moments, e.g., watching Josef K. being arrested, observing Josef K.'s intercourse, thus, transforming mundane places into a stage or auditorium transfiguring characters, into actors and spectators, making the opening episode of *The Description*, or *The Trial* potentially a performance if not theatrical<sup>14</sup>. For instance, even before K. hears the fateful news of his arrest, he notices as he lies in bed his neighbour observing him. Hence, from the very beginning of *The Trial*, Kafka's protagonist, Josef K.'s bedroom is exposed as a kind of a modern stage where he is observed, indicted, interrogated, deprived of his breakfast and agency.

The position of spectators during this episode is reminiscent of later stage experiments that subvert conventions of contemporary theatre and drama like the division of the theatre into the scenic space and the auditorium.

Ritchie Robertson reveals a similar episode describing an incident at the Café Savoy:

where they used a makeshift stage in a corner of the room, facing ordinary tables and chairs instead of an auditorium. On one embarrassing occasion the curtain failed to work properly and was suddenly torn down to reveal Levi being dragged off the stage by another actor, while Frau Tshissik, still with her make-up, looked on in dismay (Robertson 2004: 82).

Admittedly, spectators joining the actors on a makeshift stage seems ‘amateurish’ (Robertson 2005: 35; Kohn 1911) but the whole scene can in the hindsight be described as the audience becoming part of the action on stage almost a cast without designated roles. The curtain that collapsed uncovered the set design as a real part of the stage (Robertson 2005) appears close to what the Russian Formalists called “laying bare the

13 The English translation “bowing animatedly” and “her gown falling” does not render the personified nature of the verb that suggests an activity of the dress, nor does it foreground the strange combination of mobile bows of the original (Kafka 2017).

14 Culler points out that performance in its bare essence is based on the event from which theatre takes its root – the production rather than the text, the event for which there is potentially an audience (Culler 2007: 138).

device” [ostranenie priema], yet without a commenting character (as in Brecht’s texts) revealing it as an intentional move.

#### 4. DRAWINGS

Walter Benjamin observed:

Kafka’s whole work presents a codex of gestures, [...] gestures that are ever anew staged and marked by writing. Like El Greco, Kafka tears open the sky behind every gesture; but as with El Greco – who was the patron saint of the Expressionists – the gesture remains the decisive thing, the center of the event. Each gesture is an event – one might even say, a drama – in itself. (Benjamin 2015: 117f.)

Thus, Benjamin sees a visual quality in Kafka’s writing that links past and present development in the arts. Yet, Kafka expressed himself in a twofold manner in his texts and in his drawings (Kilcher/Schmidt/Butler 2022).

Scattered through his varied texts and loose papers his sketches illuminate his writing showing condensed features of diverse figures, with only slight hints of faces, with the emphasis on postures, and movements, their likeness to objects, grotesque puppets with amorph features. The sketches are not subordinate to a text, nor do they illustrate characters or their actions (except some attempts at portrayals e.g., of his mother). Their indeterminacy (Ingarden 1973; Herman 1997) is akin to the ambiguity of most of his stories that challenge the recipients’ imagination to fill in the gaps. They are signifiers without a distinct signified, but they conjure up a mood, or atmosphere and fleeting moments. They are reminiscent of a prompt book for either theatre performance or a film script.

As Claude Gandelman states “discoveries concerning the sketches can be used with profit in an evaluation of his art as a writer.” (Gandelman 1974: 239) He strives to locate their lineage with Kafka’s contemporaries, artists like George Grosz and Paul Klee, but also their predecessors. Kafka allegedly confided in Janouch “My figures have no proper spatial proportions. They have no horizon of their own. The perspective of the shapes I try to capture lies outside the paper, at the other unsharpened end of the pencil – in myself!” (Gandelman 1974: 237)<sup>15</sup>

Indeed, this observation, is not limited to his drawings it is also true of his writing with not recognizable perspective (Gregor Samsa’s changing point of view is motivated by his transformation and his new shape but in the *Description of a Struggle* the narrator’s perspective shifts without any recognizable motivation).

#### 5. CONCLUSION

His talk in which he introduced Löwy’s evening promoted the actor’s artistic expressions that show Kafka’s sensibility toward the fragmented features of popular theatre and foreshadow a similar tendency in modern performance. As Shahar states:

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<sup>15</sup> On Janouch and his questionable statements see Veronika Tuckerova (2009). He was “examining only those drawings by Kafka which have already been published.” (Gandelman 1974: 240)



Kafka's work, his Nachlass, his unfinished novels and even the stories that were published during his lifetime should be read principally as fragments. The fragment is Kafka's form. (Shahar 2007: 458)

The fragments, however, display remarkable affinity between Kafka's private and public notes including his drawings.

In all three cases discussed here (Löwy's theatre, Kafka's texts, and drawings) the recipients are alerted to fill in the gaps, to collaborate, to piece the fragments together to activate their imagination, to create a new often individual perception, to complement the words that inspire an unexpected image, where a gesture, facial expression, posture, or movement becomes a synecdoche suggesting their meaning. As Shahar suggests

The actor, (...) gave Kafka a new aesthetic mode that transformed forms of performing into forms of writing. It is an aesthetic that explored the Jewish identity of a theatrical body as a new poetic world, one without fixed, closed, and bounded identities, but rather a horizon, where the question of identity remains open. (Shahar, 2004: 227)

Shahar's conclusion is also applicable to Kafka's drawings that akin to his writings and Löwy's performance are foreshadowing many aspects of modern art.

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