

Un Fauteuil pour l'Orchestre

By Anna Graham

May 6th 2013

"An Address to the Academy" by Franz Kafka, directed by Jack Garfein

"The force can not destroy the sensible": Jack Garfein

His skeleton is drawn, commented, decrypted bone by bone on the back wall. Upstage on a pedestal are the portraits of the man and the ape, their faces blended together, each one follows the other, the two becoming one single being, the drawings expressing the trajectory of the metamorphosis. Jack Garfein adapts a short story by Kafka that narrates how an ape became a man. The story, written in 1917, was perhaps inspired by the terrible massacre of 14-18. But when Jack Garfein, an Auschwitz survivor, seizes it, Kafka's vision takes a whole different dimension. On stage, an old table, the anatomical board of a big ape. When a director has known the abuse of power, the sadism, the horror of being treated as a beast, the reading of the work densifies. Hence, when the character, an elegant man in a suit, comes in to account for the lost of his animal nature, testifies about his attempt of becoming human, the undergoing question that the play puts forward becomes clear: what is it that defines us as human. The idea of the superiority of man over his environment repeats itself during the narration.

Aristotle explains that what makes human superior is reason, that is, the ability to act with a determined goal. This man says to his audience (audience that remains invisible) that he was looking for a way out, a way out of death, and in order to survive he had no other choice than to adopt the humans way of life. All throughout his report, he explains that in his former life as an ape he was searching desperately for freedom of movement, not liberty, but only a way out of the humiliations he was inflicted with. So he creates diversion, he imitates the sailors who come to observe him in his cage, he learns to drink alcohol from the bottle even though it disgusts him, he observes and makes sure he resembles his jailors, up to the point he's accepted by them.

The human being, in order to distinguish himself, classifies, opposes humanity to animal nature. On the one side he puts the bestiality, the primal instincts, and on the other, the moral, the intelligence, the consciousness of culture, in short everything that's noble and superior. The character during his report relives his confusion, sometimes diving under the table, suddenly breaking the image of the man he managed to become, and we get the eery feeling of seeing the big ape he claims to have been several years earlier.

The acting is sober. Erik Stouvenaker recreates this painful silence of the animal facing the human abomination, and his acting bit by bit confronts us with our incapacity of understanding the animal being. It brings forward our contradictions. Lévi-Strauss talks about the "myth of exclusive dignity of human nature"; the actor's behavior disturbs, reveals our own behavior, our way of reasoning; Lévi-Strauss talks about the "cursed circle, a boundary constantly pushed further, that serves to differentiate men from other men".

Behind the face of "Red Peter", emerge once in a while the features of a being that was tortured, his weariness, his regret of having forgotten his instinct. Under the man he embodies today, remain the indelible traces of the natives exploitation, of the inhumanity toward the one who took off his clothes in order to tell his story. It reminds us of our responsibility, and expresses the notion that the earth is populated with other non-human worlds, and that human being is an animal like all the others