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THEATER

A Trial

BY MARK GEVISSER

A PROCESS and **PRAGA**. The first two plays in **TRILOGIA**, by the Dry Opera Company of São Paulo, Brazil, written and directed by Gerald Thomas, presented by La Mama E.T.C. Annex, 66 East 4th St, 475-7710. (Closed)

When certain critics use words such as *inexplicably* they're either lazy, or they're advertising their own stupidity." A voice booms this challenge in English over the babel of Wagner opera-bytes and Portuguese dialogue which is Gerald Thomas's *Trilogia*, and I am compelled to respond: Mr. Thomas, your theater is swaggering, derivative, as trying as Josef K's trial itself; yet it's intriguing—inexplicably so. Last weekend, the first two parts of the trilogy, *A Process* (based on Kafka's *The Trial*) and *Praga* (meaning both 'Prague' and 'plague' in Portuguese), were pre-

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sented. This week, we'll see *Carmem com Filtro* ("Carmen With Filtertips"). How strange that Thomas should lambast critics for using the word "inexplicable" when in this, his own critique of the theater, he constructs an utterly inexplicable world onstage when he has his players rattle around in an anguished and trembling attempt to explain it. Therein lies the intrigue of his work.

He wants us to be, I think, as startled and as trembling as his protagonists onstage—an anguished, androgynous K (played by actress Bete Coelho) in *A Process*, and an anguished Italianate restaurateur (played by Luis Damasceno) in *Praga*. Whereas K's anguish seems to be internal, the restaurateur's is external, and this may be why *Praga* is a more successful piece of theater.

A Process takes place in a vast, cavernous library lined with foreboding metallic shelves of foreboding metallic books that stretch way up into the eaves of the theater. From the outset, this space is defined as within K's mind: we observe his (her?) sleep troubled by visions that populate the library. To expunge these visions (played out by "guardians" in film-noir hats and overcoats, holding

handkerchiefs to their noses), K repeatedly jumps up and rushes to the door of the library, opening it and letting in the outside world for a moment. The door leads down a passage that terminates at an enormous mirror. The set thereby offers no escape from the turmoil of K's mind, and the "trial" that unfolds—with lawyers, judges, chess-playing baritones, and even Shakespeare—is entirely a product of that library, that mind. When, finally, K breaks down and dies, it is his "guardians," the products of his own imagination, who tie him up and plunge the dagger into his breast.

At the very beginning and very end of *A Process*, a beautiful, radiant rectangle of azure light opens up back right, the only color Thomas offers us, a window out of K's mind overlooking, perhaps, the city of Prague. Even though *Praga* also takes place in the library, on the same set as *A Process*, I felt that during intermission I had passed through that rectangle of azure light. In *Praga* the library expands—no longer K's mind, it is Prague, Italy, South America, everywhere.

The pivot of *Praga's* world is a hangman's noose that dangles down center stage. Over and over, the restaurateur and another man attempt to hang a blind woman, played by Coelho, clad in black

and draped in a shawl. Over and over, heroic and petite, lip-synching her own private opera to the strains of Shostakovich, she calmly removes the noose from around her neck. The restaurateur's face registers the frustration and the ambivalence of his task. They're so powerless, these people, that when the corpse of a man lies under a table, surrounded by votive candles, the restaurateur cannot even ignite his matches to light them.

The players are engaged in a mesmerizing struggle, a swirling, circular interaction that explores both the impotence and the complicity of people trapped in the moment of fascism. They function as interdependent parts of a self-destructive system, a system that must (and does) end in death—the restaurateur manages, eventually, to hang the blind woman. The effect is chilling. Despite himself and the top-heavy theory he explicates in a four-page press release, Thomas is capable of transcending detached histrionic gesture and entering the realm of passion. He is also capable of humor, and his work is most human when it laughs at itself—as it does frequently in *Praga* and almost never in *A Process*.

To have seen only *A Process* would have been no more than an unpleasant trial, one with a muddy verdict. Luckily,

Praga provided the means with which to decode some of *A Process*. A sound that was abstract in *A Process*, for example—the excruciatingly loud and repetitive slamming of a steel door—formed itself into the tangible presence of soldiers marching and gunfire in *Praga*. This allowed me to go back to *A Process* and reinterpret the sound. And once I saw K's perpetually startled expression mirrored on the restaurateur's face, I understood K's internal conflict much better.

While *A Process* is precisely that, the convoluted and ultimately deadly process of self-serving creativity, *Praga* is a product—it is the poetry that results from the creative process coming into contact with the workings of the world; it is art through the azure window. Thomas is disingenuous (offering us copious written translations so unintelligible they might as well be in Portuguese) and arrogant—"I propose a sort of sexual and mental activity for authors who have not yet met... and give my stage to them as if it were a raunchy bed, hoping they will procreate." The man is master of his tools—he manipulates light, sound, image, and stagesmoke as few others can—but there's little room in his bed for that essential catalyst in the procreative process: the audience. ■