

## DREAM AND LIFE IN *METAMORPHOSIS* BY BEIJING OPERA

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### ABSTRACT

Theatre has historically served as a space of dreaming, a place of escape or a retreat, a reflection of reality, and simulacra of existence. From Strindberg (*The Dream Play*), to Chuang-Tze (who has building his nice dream in jail to die one night before to escape from beheading ordered by the bad emperor the next morning), to Shakespeare (*A Midsummer Night's Dream*), to Calderón (*Life is a Dream*), to Wu Hsing-Kuo (*Metamorphosis*) to any of hundreds more, playwrights and directors have used the stage to make the ethereal, metaphysical and philosophical visible. Wu, Artistic Director and Lead Actor of *The Contemporary Legend Theatre*, theatrically adapts Franz Kafka's short fiction *Die Verwandlung* (*The Metamorphosis*) in which the protagonist wakes up from his dream to find out in shock that he becomes a big insect, and represents this story via the atricalization. Wu's solo performance (in which he plays multiple roles) in the Edinburgh International Festival in summer 2013 received considerable critical acclaims, reviews and TV interviews. In *Metamorphosis* (National Theater, Taipei, Dec. 2013), Wu stages this whole story about the metamorphosed big insect by spectacular costume, performing in Beijing Opera, to manifest the metaphysical existential pain and meaning of life. As Wu's highly praised *Kingdom of Desire* (adapted from *Macbeth*) and *Lear Is Here* (adapted from *King Lear*), we look forward to how Wu's new work *Metamorphosis* represents the desert if no compassion. Alternatively, theater makes audiences "sleep no more," to face the reality, human nature, such as selfishness and carelessness, and the existence and alienation in Existentialism.

**KEYWORDS:** *Metamorphosis*, Beijing Opera, *The Contemporary Legend Theatre*, Dream, Life, Existence

### INTRODUCTION

As the protagonist Gregor Samsa, a man turning into a cockroach in Franz Kafka's *Metamorphosis* might just "nothing but intra-narrative fiction," the imagination of Gregor's "deeply perturbed mind" of the "sticky substance" and the "purported" crawling over the ceiling and walls (Bermejo-Rubio, 2013: 278), I think that theatre has historically served as a space of dreaming, a place of escape or a retreat, a reflection of reality, and simulacra of existence. As for metamorphosis, the protagonist's absurdist metamorphosis turning from man into animals in Eugene Ionesco's *Rhinoceros* and even degraded to turn into a cockroach in Kafka's *Metamorphosis*, the adaptation of Wu Hsing-Kuo's theater performance *Metamorphosis*, the simulacra of existence, performing by Beijing Opera.

My argument is that theater reflects dream and life, and even in the bizarre impossible plot where a human being would have a metamorphosis to become a big bug in Kafka's *Metamorphosis*, or become a rhinoceros in the Theatre of the Absurd in Ionesco's play *Rhinoceros* (1959), the meaning of existence, conformity, morality, mass movements and public pressure are quite questionable. I also argue that the father-son relationship is a key issue in Kafka's *Metamorphosis* which shows the Czech poet/novelist's personal struggle with his father Herr Kafka's "strict authoritarianism, religious adherence, and lack of affection for his son" (Stone, 2000: 597). And Kafka's personal & fictional case is mirrored by

Wu's the same title performance which represents the Taiwanese performer/artistic director's personal complex feelings as a revolutionary student toward his former Beijing Opera master who didn't recognize Wu as his pupil due to Wu's "betrayal" to the Beijing Opera's convention.

The metamorphosis in Inoesco's *Rhinoceros*, where the only normal human being represented by Berenger, the central character of an everyman figure, is driven to be almost crazy by the mass metamorphosis of all of the inhabitants of a small provincial French town where he lives turn into rhinoceroses. The truth is that people even family members are selfish. Just like the protagonist Gregor Samsa's situation in Kafka's short fiction, when he cannot work due to his metamorphosis from a human being to become a big cockroach, his family abandon him and detest him.

Life is sometimes like the protagonist Berenger's resistance which echoes to the theme of the ATHE in 2014 about resistance. In terms of resistance, Laura Penny in "Parables and Politics: How Benjamin and Deleuze & Guattari Read Kafka" argues that Deleuze and Guattari are: more adamantly resistant to judgment, and critical of it, than Benjamin is.

We can see this at work in their differing interpretations of the same author, Franz Kafka. Even though Benjamin and Deleuze and Guattari ultimately end up producing divergent readings of the way Kafka depicts judgment, they do share a common interest in Kafka's interminable delays, the way he dilates time to defer judgment indefinitely. Kafka's deferrals open up the space for something immanent to unfurl itself. (2009)<sup>1</sup>.

Benjamin, Deleuze and Guattari each have their own readings on Kafka. No matter how much different tendency on historical, literary, philosophical, and metaphysical interpretations, Benjamin, Deleuze and Guattari are all interested in Kafka's interminable delays. Although deferrals, I think that Kafka's way of dilating time in *Metamorphosis* aptly presents the protagonist Gregor's painful monologues in his mind though in a bug's body in long suffering. Time opens up more space in dream and the explanation of meanings in life. Supporting evidences are offered by the following four examples about dream, focusing on the last case study to explore Wu's performance *Metamorphosis*.

## DREAM

From Strindberg (*The Dream Play*), to Chuang-Tze (who has building his nice dream in jail to die one night before to escape from beheading ordered by the bad emperor the next morning), to Shakespeare (*A Midsummer Night's Dream*), to Calderón (*Life is a Dream*), to Wu Hsing-Kuo (*Metamorphosis*) to any of hundreds more, playwrights and directors have used the stageto make the ethereal, metaphysical and philosophical visible.

- In Strindberg's *The Dream Play*, the main character Agnes, a daughter of God descends to earth to experience human beings' problems and sufferings. Finally, the moment when Agnes returns to heaven echoes to the awakening from the sequence of events as if in a dream. Unlike Agnes descends from heaven to earth and then come back to heaven in Strindberg's *The Dream Play*, the real person Chuang-Tze in ancient China escapes from the cruel reality in life by building a paradise in his dream.
- Chuang-Tze's dream of becoming a butterfly to doubt the essence life form in existence. For example, the Chinese Taoism fable, Chuang-Tze in his dream dreams of turning into a butterfly (莊周夢蝶). This Chinese

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<sup>1</sup>Laura Penny. "Parables and Politics: How Benjamin and Deleuze & Guattari Read Kafka." *Theory & Event* 12, no. 3 (2009) <http://muse.jhu.edu/>(accessed June 17, 2014).

ancient fable doubts the abstract existence—is it Chuang-Tze who dreams of becoming a butterfly? Or is it the butterfly who dreams of Chuang-Tze? That is, the doubt of the subjectivity, nature and the essence of life form. Besides, dream can be an escape as the case in Chuang-Tze's building his paradise in his dream while he was persecuted by the bad emperor to be imprisoned in the jail. With his sleeping hours get longer and longer each day due to his building his paradise in his dreams. Fortunately, he passed away peacefully in his dream just one night before his death sentence to be beheaded in the next early morning.

- **Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream***

An escape via dream can work not only in the other world, but also in this world in Shakespeare's plays. The four lovers in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* have their dreams in the forest as a place of escape, Rosalind in *As You Like It* masquerades as a man in the forest of Arden as a retreat, weaves love dreams with Orlando to teach him how to pursue for love.

- Not only in Shakespeare's plays in England, but also in Spain, the theme of dream resonates in the prince's tortured life experience in Pedro Calderon's *Life Is a Dream*. In Calderon's *Life Is a Dream*, theater reflects the cruel reality of political persecutions, a philosophical allegory about the human being's situation and the mystery of life, the conflict between father and son, and dreams vs. reality.

Figure Gregor (Wu Hsing-Kuo) turns from a man into a big cockroach in *Metamorphosis* (2013). Taipei: National Theater. Courtesy of The Contemporary Legend Theater.

### **METAMORPHOSIS--WU'S PERFORMANCE BY BEIJING OPERA**

In Edinburgh International Festival in August in 2013, Wu's performance got international visibility and warm acclaims. Some newspapers, TV stations and websites in the U. K. reported the news about his performance *Metamorphosis*. Directed, script co-adapted, and solo-performed by Wu Hsing-Kuo, song lyrics composed and script co-adapted by Da-Chun Chang, a well-known Taiwanese Modernism novelist, while the stage design was done by Lin Ke-Hua, Image Design by Wang Yi-Sheng using the technology projection of Chinese calligraphy all together rendered Kafka's absurdist existentialism masterpiece for the stage in the National Theater in Taipei in the production *Metamorphosis* (Dec. 2013).

According to Wu in the pamphlet printed for the Contemporary Legend Theatre's Elites and Friends' Club, this adaptation script has "neither story nor plot." Instead, it is "very Kafka, and a lot of Wu Hsing-Kuo's caprice"(2013:6). With strong visual effect contributed by Lai Hsuan-Wu's costume design, the success of this production in both the Edinburgh International Festival in August 2013 and in the National Theater in Taipei in Dec. 2013, attributed primarily to the excellent performance of the solo performer Wu Hsing-Kuo in the protagonist role of Gregor. Wu plays the role of Gregor, a young and single man who has worked very hard to make a living to support all his family members, but wakes up one morning from a dream to discover that he has transformed into a giant bug.

### **RETHEATRICALIZATION&THEATRICALITY**

The retheatricalization of Kafka's short fiction includes in Act Three "Door" where Wu, in white dancer's s stripe painting all in white like Japanese Noh white face make-up. Moreover, the costume is astonishing, such as the spectacular heavy headdress with two long tentacles put on Wu's head as a big bug in Act Two and Act Five. As Jean-Pierre Sarrazac

in “The Invention of “Theatricality”” points out, “one should never address any of the questions pertaining to theatrical aesthetics without having first faced the stage itself, even if only mentally.”(2002: 57). Theatrically, Wu Hsing-Kuo, Artistic Director and Lead Actor of The Contemporary Legend Theatre, adapts Franz Kafka’s short fiction *Die Verwandlung* (The Metamorphosis), in which the protagonist Gregor Samsa wakes up from his dream to find out in shock that he becomes a big bug, and represents Gregor’s mentality viaretheatricalization. Wu’s solo performance (in which he plays multiple roles) in the Edinburgh International Festival in summer 2013 received considerable critical acclaims, reviews and TV interviews.

### **WU HSING-KUO’S *METAMORPHOSIS* (DEC. 2013, TAIPEI: NATIONAL THEATER)**

Performing by Beijing Opera stylization, Wu’s one-man solo show also matches with the loneliness and solitude of the protagonist Gregor’s forced to be hid alone and die solitarily in his room waiting for death painfully. Costumed in multicultural postmodern, mixed with Chinese Beijing Opera, Japanese Noh white mask, postmodern huge bug-like, and western European black T-shirt a bird-like, with multiple layers. Setting design has Absurdist milieu, along with set and props in Minimalism.

There are total six acts. Act One “Dream,” the role is the image of a human being. Act Two “Wake Up,” Gregor (played by Wu) wakes up from the dream to discover that he transforms into an ancient reborn giant bug. While the clock drastically vibrates, raining outside, the giant bug is still too tired to get up. The bug sleeps in his dream. Act Three “Door,” Roles: baby, son and father. With the sound of a lonely baby being thrown away to the outside of the door, the narrator Wu Hsing-Kuo (dressing all in white in dancer’s stripe and paint in white with black strokes as a face paint on his head) intends to invade into the giant bug’s subconscious. Also about dream, in Act Three “Door,” Narrator Wu also invades into Kafka’s door-within-the-door, that is, the memory of the dream-within-the dream, to read Kafka’s birth, childhood, and the adult’s inner world.

In Act Four “Love,” the solo male performer in pink long skirt costume dressed in “Dan” role (female elegant lady’s role) in Beijing Opera impersonates to play the three female roles of Sister, Mother, and Lover. Using the female Beijing Opera accent (青衣), Wu, a male actor in Dan’s role (乾旦), sings the famous song “Peony Pavilion” in Kuan Opera (崑劇). Wu in Beijing Opera stylization plays the female roles step by step elegantly to climb up the white slope. In the front stage, there is a small table and a chair. The aesthetic style of Beijing Opera is “less is more.” In Act Four, Gregor embraces the beauty, the imaginary lover in the painting. However, Gregor was ruthlessly beat by his father who throws apples to bombard his back. I think this action is from Kafka’s short fiction where the apple thrown into the bug’s back to be rotten to make Gregor seriously ill. The violent beating action presents the problem of the father-son relationship.

### **FATHER-SON STRUGGLE & MASTER-PUPIL MISUNDERSTANDING**

The father-son struggle in Kafka’s *Metamorphosis* is the issue of the master and pupil relationship by the theatricality of Wu’s retheatricalization of the story. In Chinese Beijing Opera tradition, the relationship between master and pupil is like father and son. However, Chou Cheng-Jung, Wu’s former master, didn’t forgive Wu for his “betrayal” of the conventional Beijing Opera, because Wu has done several innovative intercultural performances which fuses Chinese Beijing Opera and Western canons and masterpieces since Wu’s milestone *Kingdom of Desire* (1986) adapted from Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*. Even before Chou’s death, Chou didn’t recognize Wu was his pupil. Therefore, like Kafka in his short fiction *Metamorphosis* portrays his feelings toward his strict father, Wu in his performance *Metamorphosis* also

expresses his feelings toward his harsh master. The above, in my view, echoes to the oppressive authoritarian patriarchy.

In Act Five “Prohibition,” performer Wu plays the three roles of Kafka, Bug, and Wu Hsing-Kuo himself. The radical adaptation is, when the hurt and lonely bug motionless, without eating, more desperate due to loss of his sister’s caring, wants to disappear; Kafka appears, and Wu Hsing-Kuo jumps out of the bug’s role, not wearing the bug’s big costume, but putting them on his head. Wu, taking turns in playing the roles of Kafka and Wu, they encourage Gregor to stand up to fight, live for himself, and continue to survive. In Act Six “Flying,” Wu plays the role of a bird. While the church bell rings, a bird flies to take the bug away. The sky gets bright from dark night to dawn. The bird finds a paradise without boundary to fly in freedom, which is the atricalized by Wu’s dancing. The symbol is that it seems the bug’s soul with the music ascents to heaven. From the beginning to the end, Gregor (played by Wu) has remained the center of attention. Wu’s excellent solo performance catches the audience members’ eyes.

## CONCLUSIONS

In *Metamorphosis* (National Theater, Taipei, Dec. 2013), Wu stages this whole story about the metamorphosed big insect by spectacular costume, performing in Beijing Opera, to manifest the metaphysical existential pain and meaning of life. As Wu’s highly praised *Kingdom of Desire* (adapted from *Macbeth*) and *Lear Is Here* (adapted from *King Lear*), Wu’s new work *Metamorphosis* represents the desert if no compassion.

The father-son relationship is noteworthy in Kafka’s *Metamorphosis* which shows Kafka’s personal struggle with his father Herr Kafka’s no affection toward his son and strict authoritarianism. In my perspective, it is significant for Wu to make use of this important point to express his response to his former Beijing Opera master Chou. Though misunderstanding between the master & pupil, Wu’s performance expresses the Taiwanese performer/artistic director’s personal complex feelings as a revolutionary pupil trying to renovate the decadence of Beijing Opera convention and revive it by absorbing Western masterpieces to do intercultural new productions to attract more audiences.

Theater reflects dream and life, which manifests in the bizarre impossible plot where a human being would have a metamorphosis to become a big bug in Kafka’s *Metamorphosis*. The significations of father-son struggle, Chinese master-pupil relationship in Beijing Opera training, the patriarchal oppression, existence, social pressure, loneliness, death, soul, freedom are the atricalized in Wu’s performance, which is the retheatricalization by adaptation of Kafka’s short fiction on existence.

Alternatively, theater makes audiences wake up from the dream to “sleep no more,”<sup>2</sup> to face the reality, human nature, such as selfishness and carelessness, and the existence and alienation in Existentialism. We might learn more in the dark side of literature as Kafka’s *Metamorphosis*. The abnormal existence is represented by the retheatricalization of Wu’s performance. In a way, I think human beings’ souls can get the Catharsis even inhibited in a bug’s body.

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<sup>2</sup>Here, I just echo the phrase “Sleep No More” to one of the famous scores --“Nessun dorma” in Puccini’s opera *Turandot*. Besides, this phrase is also the production title *Sleep No More* staged in the McKittrick Hotel in New York City in 2013, which is inspired by Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*.

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