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# ‘Gregor, are you Unstable? Check your Bandwidth...’: Adapting Kafka for Zoom in Hijinx Theatre’s *Metamorphosis*

BENJAMIN BROADRIBB\* 

**ABSTRACT** First performed live via Zoom in August 2020, Hijinx Theatre’s *Metamorphosis* was overtly tied to the cultural moment of the COVID-19 pandemic, offering a sense of shifting between perspectives on reality in its adaptation of Franz Kafka’s 1915 novella. The production itself appeared to be in a continual state of transformation: it shifted between scenes adapted from the novella, ‘behind-the-scenes’ vignettes in which the cast played fictionalised versions of themselves, and interactive interludes hosted by a compère-like character known as ‘the barman’. This article explores the effect of adapting Kafka’s story for the world of 2020 not only through the innovative ways in which Hijinx engaged with Zoom performance through their production at a time when experimentation with the platform as a theatrical space/medium was still very much in its infancy; but also through the manner in which the company adapted Kafka’s novella to reflect the cultural moment of the early months of lockdown. In doing so, this article considers the ways in which Hijinx’s *Metamorphosis* mercurially embodied both the hopelessness of life at the height of lockdown, and the optimism of being able to emerge from the tragedy and loss of the pandemic into a world with renewed hope.

**KEYWORDS:** COVID-19, digital theatre, Kafka, performance, twenty-first-century culture, Zoom

At the start of the third decade of the third millennium, what does it mean for something to be ‘Kafkaesque?’ On a literal level, the adjective indicates a work in the style of Franz Kafka, as it has since it was coined in the middle of the twentieth century. But its essence stretches far beyond the manner in which words have been put together on a page, encapsulating the sensibility which permeated Kafka’s distinct, modernist view of the world. For a vivid exemplification of the meaning of ‘Kafkaesque’, I turn to Frederick R. Karl’s definition from the closing decade of the twentieth century:

... [W]hen you enter a surreal world in which all your control patterns, all your plans, the whole way in which you have configured your own behavior, begins to fall to pieces, when you find yourself against a force that does not lend itself to the way you perceive the world. You don’t give up, you don’t lie down and die. What you do is struggle against this with all of your equipment, with whatever you have. But of course you don’t stand a chance. That’s Kafkaesque. (qtd. in Edwards 12)

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Karl also rails against the overuse of the adjective—‘someone going to catch a bus and finding that all the buses have stopped running and saying that’s Kafkaesque. That’s not’ (qtd. in Edwards 12). Whilst being a literary eponym relating to an author not originally writing in English, ‘Kafkaesque’ has its roots in an Anglophone context: its earliest usage appears in British political magazine *The New Statesman and Nation* in 1940, just sixteen years after Kafka’s death (‘Kafkaesque’). Its potential overuse equally arises from its resonance in the English-speaking world. For example, Deborah Smith’s 2015 English translation of Han Kang’s novel *The Vegetarian*, first published in Korean in 2007, was ‘described by its British publishers (and by a number of reviewers) as Kafkaesque’—seemingly not the case for the Korean original—and, in May 2016, online searches for the word ‘spiked dramatically’ after Smith’s translation was awarded the Man Booker prize that month (‘Kafkaesque’).

However, based on Karl’s distillation of its meaning, and despite the Anglophone world’s proclivity towards its overuse, it feels unquestionably apt to describe the experiences of countless people throughout the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic—particularly during the lockdown restrictions enforced globally during 2020 and 2021—as being Kafkaesque in nature. The virus itself irrefutably and permanently changed perceptions of the world for those who lived through the pandemic; and social distancing, stay-at-home orders, travel restrictions, and industry shutdowns undoubtedly laid waste to the future many had envisioned, forcing significant behavioural changes in a matter of weeks.

It is no great surprise, therefore, that parallels have been drawn between the world in the grip of COVID and society as presented in Kafka’s work. In his 2022 publication *After Lockdown: A Metamorphosis*, French philosopher Bruno Latour extends his Kafkaesque analogy of life in the early 2020s beyond the pandemic to encompass the wider cultural moment of the early twenty-first century:

When I wake up, I start to feel the torments suffered by the hero of Kafka’s novella, *Metamorphosis* ... It’s as if I, too, had undergone an actual metamorphosis in January 2020. I still remember how, before, I could move around innocently taking my body with me. Now I feel like I have to make an effort and haul along at my back a long trail of CO<sub>2</sub> that won’t let me buy a plane ticket and take off, and that now hampers my every movement ... But it’s been worse since January because, on top of that, I now project in front of me—they tell me non-stop—a cloud of aerosols whose fine droplets can spread tiny viruses in the lungs capable of killing my neighbours, who would suffocate in their beds, overrunning the hospital services. (2–3)

The Kafkaesque quality of pandemic life extended beyond the personal experiences of individuals to the futility of the efforts by those in power. In her *New York Times* opinion piece, Elizabeth Rosenthal described ‘the latest fiasco’ in the United States coronavirus testing programme in July 2020, when test results were taking up to two weeks to arrive, as ‘perhaps the most Kafka-esque ... One canon of medical practice is that you order a test only if you can act on the result. And with a turnaround time of a week or two, you cannot. What we have now is often not testing—it’s testing theater’ (23). Rosenthal’s phrase was echoed in Derek Thompson’s description of ‘hygiene theater’ in his piece for *The Atlantic* published only three days later:

COVID-19 has reawakened America's spirit of misdirected anxiety, inspiring businesses and families to obsess over risk-reduction rituals that make us *feel* safer but don't actually do much to reduce risk—even as more dangerous activities are still allowed. This is hygiene theater.

Both Latour's world-weary account of 2020 life, and Rosenthal's and Thompson's respective characterisations of the US government's response as a farcical performance, embody the bleak cynicism of Karl's suggestion that Kafka 'saw ... that history was going to roll over everybody, that everybody was going to become a victim of history. That's Kafkaesque. You struggle against history and history destroys you' (qtd. in Edwards 12). Together, they also crystallise the experience of living through lockdown as a surreal phantasmagoria, in which the lines between real life and theatre, between lived and performed experiences, became uncomfortably and uncannily blurred.

The parallels highlighted by Latour between Kafka's most famous work, *Die Verwandlung*—commonly translated into English as *The Metamorphosis*—and the experiences of many waking up to a world overrun by COVID-19, were also exploited by Hijinx Theatre Company in adapting the novella into a digital theatre production in August 2020, six months into the first UK lockdown. *Metamorphosis*, directed by Hijinx's Artistic Director Ben Pettitt-Wade, was the company's first live online theatre production via video conferencing software Zoom. Founded in 1981 in Cardiff, Wales, and led since 2015 by Pettitt-Wade, Hijinx are 'a professional producing company working to pioneer, produce and promote opportunities for actors with learning disabilities and/or autism' ('About Hijinx'). The company's website states that

The heart of our work is always our learning disabled and/or autistic artists, who constantly challenge perceptions of what theatre and film can be and how they should be made. Performances that change the way that we perceive the world are the performances that remain with us forever. This is what we aspire to make. ('About Hijinx')

*Metamorphosis* fulfilled this mission statement, not only through the innovative ways in which Hijinx engaged with Zoom performance through their production at a time when experimentation with the platform as a theatrical space/medium was still very much in its infancy; but also through the manner in which the company adapted Kafka's novella to reflect the cultural moment of the early months of lockdown. Rather than consistently making their production Kafkaesque in line with Karl's nihilistic definition of the term, Hijinx's *Metamorphosis* mercurially embodied both the hopelessness of life at the height of lockdown, and the optimism of being able to emerge from the tragedy and loss of the pandemic into a world with renewed hope.

#### 'SOMETHING'S NOT RIGHT'

Hijinx's *Metamorphosis* embraced Zoom as a performance medium in a way that numerous performers and directors had been doing since late March 2020, when the first digital productions performed live online in lockdown began appearing only weeks after stay-at-home orders had been implemented in a great many countries around the world. As Barbara Fuchs notes, the 'earliest [Zoom] productions were remarkable for how matter-of-factly they presented theater on Zoom, even as critics

struggled to name and define what they were seeing’, establishing the video conferencing software ‘as a means to replicate the copresence and community of in-person theater’ (27).

The promotional webpage for *Metamorphosis* drew on a translation of the recognisable opening line of Kafka’s novella, as well as clearly positioning Hijinx’s adaptation as reflecting the world of the pandemic:

When Gregor Samsa woke up one morning from unsettling dreams, he found himself changed in his bed into a monstrous verminous bug.

In that moment his world instantly changed. Unable to leave his home, he could not work, he could not communicate, he could not hold his family close, he went from provider to burden.

He was on mute while the world revolved around him.

A cast of 12, all of whom awoke to a different world, without work, forced to reinterpret their profession, their identity, their very worth to the world, offer a reinterpretation of Franz Kafka’s classic novella for our times. (‘Metamorphosis’)

*Metamorphosis* was just as much a performance about living—and performing—during the pandemic as it was an adaptation of Kafka’s story. Running at just under an hour, Pettitt-Wade’s production was itself seemingly in a continual state of transformation: an intentionally fragmented collection of scenes which blended Kafka with the social and cultural moment of lockdown.

Kafka’s novella was directly adapted during several scenes throughout Hijinx’s *Metamorphosis*, which were performed in Zoom’s ‘Gallery View’ so that the isolated actors appeared on screen together, and yet separately in their respective Zoom windows. These scenes were adapted by the company to take place in the world of 2020 with modern English dialogue. They also embraced what Emily Ingram, Master of Props for *The Show Must Go Online*—one of the most prolific lockdown digital theatre projects—describes as the ‘homespun aesthetic’ of Zoom performance (qtd. in ‘Shakespeare for Everyone’ 156). Actors wore simple costumes and accessories sourced or crafted from what they had at home, and their domestic performance spaces were only hidden from view in a rudimentary way, if at all (see Fig. 1). By choosing in these scenes not to use Zoom’s ‘green screen’ functionality, which allows users to choose an image to appear behind them, masking their real-world setting, Pettitt-Wade more impactfully tied his production to the lockdown moment. The audience saw actors performing in isolation from their own homes, reflecting their own experience whilst watching the production.

The Zoom performance of Kafka’s novella was reframed as a production occurring within Hijinx’s *Metamorphosis* through scenes focused upon a secondary narrative, which offered mockumentary style behind-the-scenes vignettes of the audition and rehearsal process. The main focus of this second story was Morgan (Morgan Thomas), the fictional director of the production-within-the-production. With Thomas and the cast playing fictionalised versions of themselves, these scenes were reminiscent of Simon Evans’s lockdown-set BBC sitcom *Staged* (2020–), starring Michael Sheen and David Tennant who equally played themselves in an exaggerated style. These sequences in particular also offered parallels to *End Meeting for All*, a series of three improvised, single-take



**Figure 1** Lucy White as Greta, Hannah McPake as Mr. Samsa, Richard Newnham as Mrs. Samsa and Douglas Rutter (unseen) as Gregor, performing Hijinx Theatre’s *Metamorphosis* from unadorned domestic spaces and with homespun costumes. Screenshot courtesy of Hijinx Theatre.

Zoom performances by Sheffield-based theatre company Forced Entertainment, which were live-streamed in April and May 2020. According to Fuchs:

In fits and starts, *End Meeting* stages the tentative creation of a theatrical work, occasionally set aside for other desultory projects that its characters haphazardly attempt. As a play-within-a-play, it chronicles the challenges of its own new form, mobilizing them to consider the larger difficulties of existing in a time of pandemic. (45)

Fuchs further suggests that *End Meeting for All* ‘depends on the audience’s previous rapid assimilation, over long weeks of lockdown, of the unwritten Rules of Zoom, which the piece then blithely proceeds to dismantle’ (44). Moreover, Forced Entertainment’s production ‘reflects on new habits of viewership and communication, confronting audiences with how passively and quickly we have adapted to the dictates of digital platforms as we present ourselves on our endless Zoom galleries’ (Fuchs 44). In adapting Kafka’s novella both as a Zoom production and as a production-within-the-production, Hijinx’s *Metamorphosis* exploited the resonances of Gregor’s transformation to similarly reflect the ways in which life—and performance—moved and transformed online in lockdown.

Amongst these two interconnected narratives, Pettitt-Wade further engaged with both Kafka’s *The Metamorphosis* and the nature of Zoom performance through discrete vignettes. Some of these used the writer’s themes and ideas as jumping-off points to create ghosts and echoes of the novella’s motifs and characters, presented as standalone sequences which complemented the main narratives in both poignant and humorous ways. *Metamorphosis* also included several interactive sections featuring a compère-like character known as ‘the barman’ (Owen Pugh) who, initially at least, offered the

audience a friendly and helpful presence through whom they could navigate the production as a whole.

Whilst taking in several modes of performance, *Metamorphosis* predominantly offered an example of the ‘Virtual Theatre’ model of lockdown digital performance, in which ‘productions [are] performed live on Zoom with the audience joining the actors on the call, allowing those watching to interact with the performance’ (‘Introduction’ 10). The progenitor of this performance model was *The Tempest*, a co-production by Oxford-based Creation Theatre Company and Portstewart-based Big Telly Theatre Company, directed by Zoë Seaton and performed live on Zoom in April 2020. An adaptation of Shakespeare’s play, *The Tempest* was based upon the companies’ previous in-person immersive co-production performed in Oxford, England, in 2019. Pascale Aebischer describes how the cast of the 2020 *Tempest*

made regular use of their webcams as a means of direct address to the audience, using the Zoom platform flexibly as a *locus* that also afforded casual *platea* moments that openly acknowledged the audience’s presence. The performance opened with a ‘press conference’ in which audience members were invited to ask the royal party questions they had been sent via the chat function. The company thus used the platform in the mode of a webinar broadcast that structurally limited the audience’s ability to respond even as it enabled them to feel seen. (65)

The barman’s interactive scenes in Hijinx’s production both drew on—and subverted—the model instigated by Creation and Big Telly’s press conference. The audience was directly welcomed by the barman during *Metamorphosis*’s opening scene, for example, which was not directly adapted from Kafka’s novella. The barman spent the first few minutes jovially explaining to the audience how the Zoom webinar format differed from a regular video call—most notably that they would not be able to see or hear each other for much of the performance, and that audience members would only appear on screen if invited to do so. Having established the rules of the performance space via the barman’s orientation, Pettitt-Wade positioned *Metamorphosis* as a playful, interactive experience in a similar vein to Creation and Big Telly’s *Tempest*. The barman proceeded to ask audience members to use the Zoom webinar’s ‘Raise Hand’ function if they would like to join him at the virtual bar—a stereotypical pub backdrop that appeared behind Pugh which, notably, was created by using Zoom’s green screen functionality in this scene. The barman chatted with audience members who were featured on screen about where they were watching from and ‘passed’ drinks from his screen to theirs—his pint glasses ‘transforming’ into teacups, mugs and any other drinking vessels audience members had to hand.

However, as the barman interacted with those who had joined him at the virtual bar, messages began to appear in the Zoom Chat, seemingly from an audience member called Gareth:

Hello?  
Can you hear me?  
I think I’m on mute.  
How do I unmute?



I'm stuck  
 Something's not right  
 I'm not ok  
 I feel empty  
 I'm lost.

Any attempts by members of the audience to explain the Zoom webinar format to Gareth through the Chat functionality were unsuccessful. The messages were in fact part of the production, however, as the ruse was revealed soon after. Gareth (Gareth John) shifted from communicating through the Chat to being audible (but not visible) in the webinar, his disembodied voice characterised by confusion and fear. This led to Pugh first dropping his barman character to address Gareth seemingly as himself, then becoming more irritable and removing the virtual bar background to reveal his living room at home, making clear to Gareth—and the audience—that none of what was visible on screen was 'real'.

By opening *Metamorphosis* in this way, Pettitt-Wade shrewdly subverted expectations of Virtual Theatre. The director played on the likelihood that most audience members would be familiar with Zoom by this point in 2020, but that they may not have experienced the webinar format. As a result, the barman's explanation of how webinar functionality differed from a standard Zoom meeting felt entirely authentic: it was genuinely included to familiarise audience members with the format and functionality of the performance space, whilst also laying the foundations of the barman/Pugh's subsequent interaction with Gareth. Similarly, Gareth sincerely came across as a confused viewer, drawing the audience into what initially appeared to be a real technical hitch, before revealing the theatrical subterfuge. In a matter of minutes, Hijinx fully established and then completely deconstructed the conventions of Virtual Theatre on Zoom. Gemma Kate Allred has noted that a 'key trait of live lockdown performance is "showing the working"—pulling back the curtain, so to speak', and that this 'act[s] to signify the liveness of the moment ... affording tangibility to an intangible digital world' ('Notions of Liveness' 82). In *Metamorphosis*, this worked to both settle and unsettle the audience: making them feel comfortable with the Zoom webinar format and the seemingly safe space of the barman's virtual bar, then 'pulling back the curtain' to put the wider pandemic context of the production on screen in unambiguous fashion.

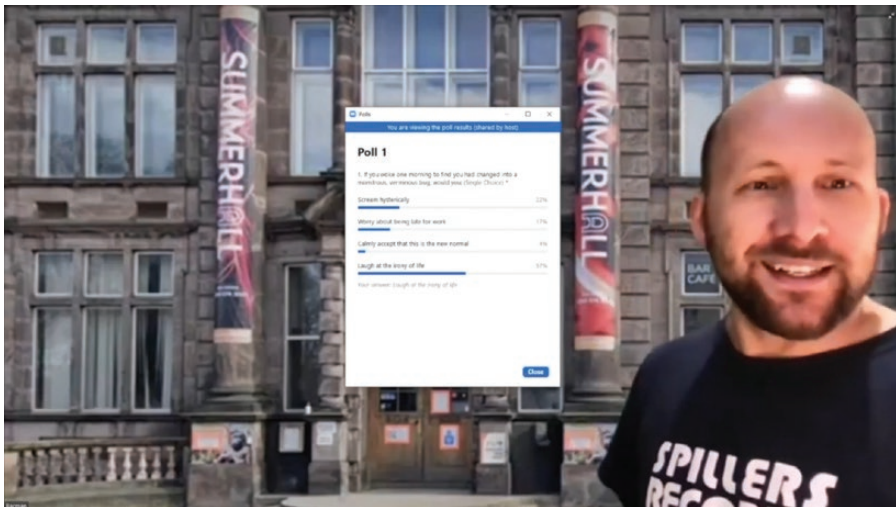
*Metamorphosis*'s introductory scene also established the theme of becoming alienated by technology, which was revisited throughout the production. Gareth's predicament embodied the concept of being 'on mute while the world revolved around him'—he was both literally and figuratively 'lost' in technology. In this moment, Gareth also echoed Gregor Samsa, attempting to navigate a 'new normal' but fundamentally being unable to do so. Whilst Zoom and other video conferencing software had allowed countless people across the world to connect with colleagues and loved ones in lockdown, those unable to access, or uncomfortable with navigating, these platforms had been left bewildered, alienated and disconnected—much like the transformed Gregor in Kafka's novella. The pandemic highlighted existing digital inequity in society, as people with learning disabilities were significantly less able to stay socially connected using digital technology during the pandemic through a lack of digital literacy and



confidence with using technology, as well as being unable to access additional support needed from others (see Spassiani et al.). As Pettitt-Wade's cast featured several learning disabled and/or autistic performers, Hijinx as a company were exceptionally well-placed to highlight this issue. Zoom itself was rendered Kafkaesque as a result: from the perspective of Gareth and other members of the Hijinx company who have learning disabilities, the software presented 'a force that does not lend itself to the way [they] perceive the world' (Karl qtd. in Edwards 12).

This menacing reflection of Zoom as a platform was furthered through later interactive sequences hosted by the barman, during which viewers were asked to vote for one of several options using the software's 'Poll' function. During the first of these, the audience was presented with the question of what they would do 'if you woke one morning to find you had changed into a monstrous verminous bug', with four answer options (see Fig. 2). Hosted by the barman in his typical upbeat manner—'Everyone loves a Poll, don't they?'—the scene operated on a number of levels. Firstly, it offered an adaptation of the opening events of Kafka's novella: together, the question and second answer option—'Worry about being late for work'—specifically reflected Gregor's transformation and subsequent train of thought respectively. This irreverently adapted Kafka's narrative into an ultimately trivial interaction: whilst the results were displayed and differed during each performance depending on how different audiences voted, the production always continued in the same way regardless of the outcome.

As well as deconstructing Kafka, the scene also further subverted interactivity in Zoom performance. Fuchs argues that 'immersive theater in a digital mode goes far beyond recreating a feeling of liveness and community: it breaks new ground in audience involvement' and that '[w]ith its new avenues for audience engagement, the pandemic has effectively accelerated the development of participatory modes', so that it



**Figure 2** Owen Pugh as the barman during the first Zoom Poll scene. Screenshot courtesy of Hijinx Theatre.

‘more closely approximates, and better reflects, a culture that is moving toward ever more interactive forms’ (65). Whilst the barman’s segment exemplified this form of audience involvement and interactivity, it also lampooned Zoom’s Poll functionality—originally designed for use in business meetings—through the intentionally absurd and meaningless quiz. Two of the answer options—‘Scream hysterically’ and ‘Laugh at the irony of life’—furthered the idea of Zoom’s sinister nature introduced at the outset of the production: the former was simultaneously both ridiculous and horrific, whilst the latter was cynically defeatist. The remaining answer option—‘Calmly accept that this is now the new normal’—tied the production into the lockdown moment, with the phrase ‘new normal’ having been used in government COVID briefings and across the media in the UK and beyond to describe the irrevocable changes to everyday life experienced by people around the world. Gregor’s transformation once again became an allegory for the lockdown measures around the world, and the way in which many aspects of life shifted from in-person to online spaces. Later Polls similarly functioned on multiple levels, but became increasingly disturbing in the answer options available and in the way the barman presented them. At one point, the barman asked the audience to choose what to feed Morgan, transformed at this point in a manner reminiscent of Gregor, with one of the four choices being ‘rotting flesh’. In this instance, the performance changed depending on the result of the Poll, with the barman requesting that whatever received the most votes be provided to Morgan for him to eat. Whilst audience members could opt out of interacting during any of the Polls, those who did were ultimately choosing to participate in the Kafkaesque digital world presented by Pettitt-Wade.

Whilst Hijinx’s *Metamorphosis* embraced the inherent bleakness and cynicism of Kafka’s narrative at points such as these, Pettitt-Wade regularly balanced this with scenes of sincerity and hope. This was aptly demonstrated in one of the final scenes, which acted to rescue Gregor from his pitiless abandonment and grim death towards the end of Kafka’s novella. Having been heard at several points throughout the production as a disembodied voice, Gareth finally appeared on screen. Alone at first, Gareth asked if Gregor was there, and encouraged him to ‘turn [his] camera on’. Morgan then appeared on screen, looking fraught and dishevelled. Addressing Morgan as Gregor, Gareth asked him: ‘Are you okay?’. Morgan did not answer, appearing close to tears. ‘What’s the matter?’, Gareth then asked. Morgan looked down silently, at which Gareth told him: ‘It’s going to be okay. Everything is going to be okay. I’m here now Gregor’—then, hesitantly, ‘I... love you Gregor’. At this, Morgan looked into the camera, his expression calmer, and replied, ‘I love you Gregor’—repeating Gareth’s final line without faltering. The scene was played with emotional sincerity, the two men sharing a moment of tenderness and connection which likely reflected the experiences of many in the audience who had used Zoom to stay in contact with their loved ones. No longer lost in digital technology, Gareth’s simple message of comfort and hope came across as earnest. Rather than allowing Gregor to decline and perish, as his family does in the novella, Hijinx offered the character salvation through Gareth’s heartfelt care for Morgan’s wellbeing. Addressing each other as ‘Gregor’, Gareth and Morgan transformed Kafka’s protagonist into a symbolic figure encapsulating the widespread day-to-day mental and emotional toll of lockdown life. Whilst there were two Gregors on screen, there were

many more in the audience and across the world. Under COVID-19, we are all Gregor to some degree. Underscoring Hijinx's redemption of Kafka's protagonist with this message, the scene offered an earnest note of hopefulness and affective depth to counterbalance the Kafkaesque bleakness which characterised other elements of the production.

#### 'A MONSTROUS VERMINOUS BUG'

The duplication and refraction of Gregor discussed above were paralleled in Hijinx's engagement with the image most associated with the character's transformation—that of a giant insect. Most often depicted as a cockroach, the image of the insect has become synonymous not just with *The Metamorphosis* but with Kafka more widely in popular culture. A key example of this phenomenon occurred on 7 July 2013, which would have been Kafka's 130th birthday. On this date, Google featured an animated 'Doodle' above the search bar on their homepage, featuring an anthropomorphised cockroach heading through an open door, which replaced the double 'O' of 'Google' (Bury 2013).

Despite its ubiquity, the image of the insect is one that has arguably been perpetuated more by popular culture than by Kafka's story. Reflecting on her own experience of translating *The Metamorphosis* from the original German, Susan Bernofsky notes that:

The epithet *ungeheures Ungeziefer* in the opening sentence poses one of the greatest challenges to the translator. Both [words] ... are negations—virtual nonentities—prefixed by *un*. ... In my translation, Gregor is transformed into 'some sort of monstrous insect' with 'some sort of' added to blur the borders of the somewhat too specific 'insect'; I think Kafka wanted us to see Gregor's new body and condition with the same hazy focus with which Gregor himself discovers them. (121–2)

Idan Yaron and Omri Herzog go further still, arguing that:

Most readers of the novella imagine a cockroach, probably based on an instinctual reaction of disgust. But one should not grasp the 'bug' as a key for analogical or allegorical interpretation ... The interpretative spectrum of the 'bug' is endless, converging at a zero point—the 'ground zero' of meaning, or endless meanings. (1095)

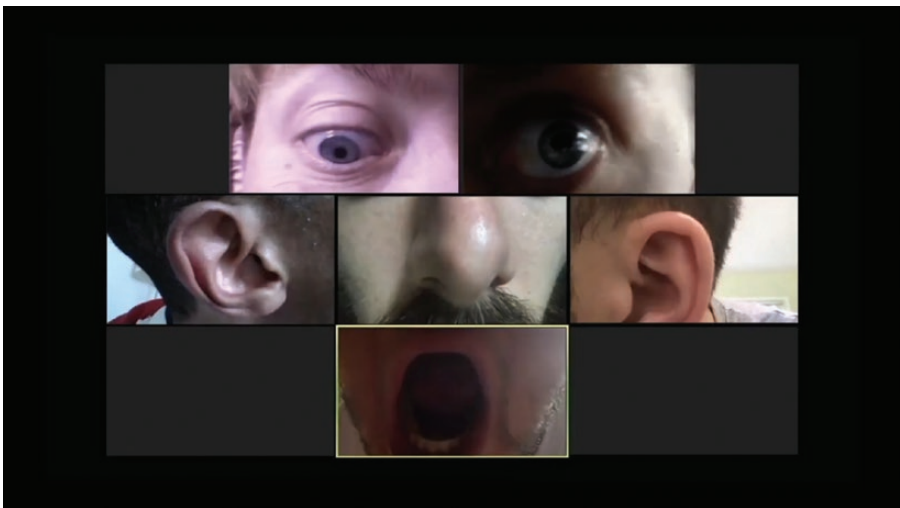
Moreover, Yaron and Herzog describe Kafka's novella as 'an "iconoclastic" (image-breaking) text: it rejects an iconic representation of the "bug" or of the "metamorphosis" as such' (1096). However, they note that '[t]he culture of the digital era is fascinated by the image', arguing that '[w]hen such texts as Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* are expropriated by the cultural means of the digital era, their "iconoclastic" tendencies most naturally turn "iconodulic" (image-serving)' (1096–7).

In contrast to this digital trend, Pettitt-Wade resisted the visual imagery of the insect throughout much of Hijinx's *Metamorphosis*. As illustrated by the scene between Gareth and Morgan discussed earlier, Gregor was not represented by one single actor or image, but instead became fragmented across the cast and the production to become symbolic of social isolation. The first scene in which Kafka's protagonist was portrayed as a discrete character was a Zoom call between Gregor, played by Douglas Rutter in this scene, and his unsympathetic boss Mr. McKenzie (Dan McGowan), after Gregor failed to turn up for an online meeting. Gregor was initially heard but not seen, as Rutter

kept his camera turned off and performed primal, guttural noises into his microphone. When the actor switched his camera on, he was only visible through shadowy reflections off a framed picture on his desk. The choice by Pettitt-Wade to represent Gregor by consciously *not* having him on screen parallels Bernofsky's 'negations', as well as echoing Kafka's own insistence that no illustration of the 'bug' be featured alongside the story when it was first published (Bernofsky 121).

On the surface, the scene was played for laughs, particularly when Gregor's mother (Pugh) and father (Michelle McTernan) joined the 'call' in comically exaggerated fashion. However, the intertitle 'unstable'—typed onto the screen before the scene began—highlighted its importance in establishing the concept of Gregor as embodying the emotional and psychological toll of enforced isolation during the pandemic. McKenzie's impatient questioning of Gregor's internet connection—'Are you unstable? Check your bandwidth'—took on a double meaning, highlighting how the reliance on digital technology to remain connected, which many people took for granted, in fact served to isolate many others further than ever, especially those living with disabilities. This was demonstrated in the scene's final moments: only Gregor's camera remained on, his silhouette shaking and convulsing in the picture frame glass, as the domineering voices of his parents and boss repeated and overlapped cacophonously. The screen then suddenly cut to a surreal face constructed from webcam close-ups on eyes, ears, a nose, and mouth (see Fig. 3). The shot brought to life in abstract fashion the increased isolation digital technology can facilitate, embodying not only the fragmentary experience of those lacking the confidence, capability, or digital literacy to remain socially connected online, but also transforming Zoom itself into an uncannily 'monstrous' creature.

Pettitt-Wade did include references to Kafka's 'bug' imagery at times during *Metamorphosis*, however, with the most prominent appearing during the production's pre-recorded final scene. The sequence began with a medium shot of Morgan, who



**Figure 3** The surreal Zoom 'face'. Screenshot courtesy of Hijinx Theatre.

appeared with the head of a fly, achieved through the actor wearing a rubber mask (see Fig. 4). Pettitt-Wade then cut to a high-angle long shot, presented in the manner of security camera footage, of Morgan *without* a fly's head sitting at his dining room table with his laptop in front of him, watching the footage of the version of himself *with* a fly's head that the audience had just seen (see Fig. 5). The high-angle shot was tinted red through the same camera filter that had previously been used in the production during



**Figure 4** Morgan Thomas as Morgan with a fly's head. Screenshot courtesy of Hijinx Theatre.



**Figure 5** Morgan Thomas as Morgan, without a fly's head, staring at the version of himself with a fly's head. Screenshot courtesy of Hijinx Theatre.

scenes focused on Morgan's transformation (such as when the audience voted on what to feed him), creating a visual link to Morgan undergoing a Gregor-like metamorphosis. Morgan then stood up and turned to look into the camera, as if noticing it for the first time (see Fig. 6). He reached up and took the camera off the wall above him (see Fig. 7). At this point, the camera began swooping around Morgan's dining room, accompanied by a buzzing insect sound effect. Whilst achieved simply through the actor moving a handheld camera around his home, the resulting effect was disorienting and ambiguous. Was it that the camera itself had always presented a literal fly-on-the-wall perspective, and that Morgan reaching up had disturbed the fly, causing it to buzz around



**Figure 6** Morgan Thomas as Morgan noticing the camera. Screenshot courtesy of Hijinx Theatre.



**Figure 7** Morgan Thomas as Morgan reaching up to the camera. Screenshot courtesy of Hijinx Theatre.



the room? Or was Morgan's own metamorphosis finally complete, with the swooping footage in fact representing Morgan's point of view in his transformed fly form? This was left ambiguous in the production, with what was happening at this point open to subjective interpretation. The fly buzzed around the room for several seconds, pausing briefly on family photographs on the mantelpiece (see Fig. 8); then finally escaped outside into the back garden, at which point the red filter was removed and the camera pointed towards the sky (see Fig. 9). The shot then faded to footage of a sunset, which lingered peacefully on screen for several seconds.



**Figure 8** The camera/fly pausing briefly at the mantelpiece (Phoebe Logan appears in the photograph). Screenshot courtesy of Hijinx Theatre.



**Figure 9** The camera/fly looking up to the sky. Screenshot courtesy of Hijinx Theatre.



Like many aspects of Hijinx's *Metamorphosis*, the ending defied straightforward explanation. However, at the time of the production's performance during the lockdowns of 2020 in the UK and around the world, Pettitt-Wade's ambiguous conclusion offered another sincere moment of hope and positivity, once again adapting the bleak and debilitating transformation Gregor undergoes in Kafka's novella into a liberating and empowering moment of optimism. If Kafka's 'bug' presents an opportunity for endless reinterpretation as Yaron and Herzog suggest, leading to infinite depthless duplication in the digital era, then Hijinx's *Metamorphosis* rescued and rehabilitated the 'bug', both literally and figuratively returning Gregor to human form once again.

### 'I LOVE YOU GREGOR'

Virtual Theatre has the power to make audience members feel part of the world of the production in a way that many other forms of performance do not. As Allred notes in respect of Creation and Big Telly's *Tempest*, 'audience participation created a sense of community, a rare opportunity in a socially distanced world to come together with strangers and act as one ... I wonder whether, in person, the effect would have been quite so strong' (*The Tempest* 537–8). Hijinx's *Metamorphosis* took that power and used it to create a genuine spectrum of emotions for the audience watching and interacting, forcing those emotions to juxtapose and contradict each other. Erin Sullivan, too, has noted 'the importance of communion in digital theatre' created during the pandemic, 'both through real-time interaction between audience and performers ... and an invitation to engage in heightened reflection about our shared, complicated existence' (218). *Metamorphosis* exemplifies both of Sullivan's forms of digital communion. Pettitt-Wade's production was inherently Kafkaesque through existing as an adaptation of *The Metamorphosis*, and at times embraced Karl's sense of the word indicating hopelessness in impossible situations against seemingly unstoppable forces. But it also pushed against this fatalistic cynicism through scenes that offered a sense of affective sincerity and authentic connection. In doing so, Hijinx ultimately presented a pragmatically optimistic perspective on the future beyond the pandemic, earnestly imagining a world in which humanity can come together with collective empathy to create a better, more equal, and more inclusive world.

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