

British Theatre Guide

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Metamorphosis

Lemn Sissay adapted from the novella by Franz Kafka

Frantic Assembly with Theatre Royal Plymouth, Curve, MAST Mayflower Studios and Lyric

Hammersmith Theatre

Curve Theatre, Leicester

19–23 September 2023

Kafka's absurdist novella *The Metamorphosis* has inspired multiple retellings in numerous genres since its publication in 1915 and is notoriously ambiguous, save for the central "plot": Gregor Samsa wakes one day having metamorphosed into a large insect. He can no longer work and eventually dies, having felt a burden to his disgusted family.

Poet Lemn Sissay keeps the ambiguity going in this new production with Frantic Assembly, currently in the early stages of a 13-venue tour. A distorted bedroom on a platform, its tilted perspective invoking claustrophobia and a feeling of a world off-kilter, dominates the stage and is Gregor's world as he tries to adjust to his new form. He shares his home with his sister Grete (Hannah Sinclair Robinson) and parents Mr and Mrs Samsa (Troy Glasgow and Louise Mai Newberry). The family receive ominous visits from the Chief Clerk (Joe Layton, who also doubles as the lodger in act two).

Sissay's use of repeated phrases and adages ("beggars can't be choosers") combined with Frantic Assembly's focus on physicality is a helpful technique frequently employed to signify deterioration over time and reinforce Gregor (Felipe Pacheco) and his family's descent into despair. In this production, the loss of a job and income are a key theme, and while Jon Bausor's set and Becky Gunstone's costume designs imply the setting as anytime from mid-20th century onwards, this is certainly relevant to many now as the cost-of-living crisis shows no sign of easing.

Pacheco is utterly and painfully convincing as a man inhabited by his "illness"; he is overtaken by convulsions and tics as well as the ability to climb, swing and move around the room as, literally, a man possessed. He is moth-like as he hovers around the light fitting and appears to transform into a grotesque insect as he creates an exoskeleton of chairs, their legs protruding like multiple alien limbs.

Clever lighting design (Simisola Majekodunmi) adds greatly to the tension in this piece and allows for artful shadows and disappearing tricks. Helen Skiera's sound design provides an insistent synth soundscape throughout.

Metamorphosis could also be viewed as a portrayal of mental health issues, with the door to Gregor's room sometimes open, sometimes closed, members of his family either allowed entry or kept outside listening in.

Things aren't always what they seem as, through monologue, each family member questions their own experiences, thus adding to the overall unsettling atmosphere.

Director Scott Graham, Sissay and the cast and creative team deliver this interpretation of *Metamorphosis* rich in signifiers, metaphor and poetry, both in word and action. Pleasing too to see so many groups of young people attending by the coachload, and I hope they gained much inspiration from this stimulating production.

Reviewer: [Sally Jack](#)