

Franz Kafka presents;
The Great Amerikanerin Vanishing Act

A phantasmagoria with songs

by
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CAST OF CHARACTERS

9 actors

4 M, 5 F

Franz Kafka

Yiddish Theatre Troupe:

Itzhak Löwy...director of the Yiddish Theatre Troupe from Poland

Frankie K... a young Yiddish stage hand playing *Die Amerikanerin*, also the imaginary prototype for Kafka's fictional protagonist in his unfinished novel *Amerika*.
(It is strongly suggested that an actress be cast in this male ingénue role, keeping in the tradition of Yiddish actresses playing "pants" roles in the theatre.)

Mrs. Klug...an actress in the troupe

Yip...a member of the troupe

Yap...a member of the troupe

The Great Babushka...an old Polish woman who mops and needs insurance. After her first entrance, she may appear on stage and silently and gesturally comment on Kafka's actions and responses.

Female Influences:

Felice Bauer...Franz's fiancée

Mary Anne, a sewing girl, a character in the play *Die Amerikanerin*

The actors playing Mary Anne, Frankie K and Mrs. Klug may also play Kafka's sisters, Elli, Valli and Ottla Kafka

A note on the text:

A glossary of the Yiddish and special words used in the play is provided at the back of the script with a few other dramaturgical and historical notes.

Franz Kafka presents: **The Great Amerikanerin Vanishing Act**
by Ken Prestininzi

(An open window.

A silhouette of a tall thin man in front of it, backlit by the blue of the winter moon. He might be nude.

He is. He is doing exercises in front of the open window for his health. Franz Kafka believes doing exercises in front of an open window in winter will improve his health. His arms are held straight out. He does squats. He does sidebends.

He catches his breath. He coughs. He lifts a fluttering white handkerchief to his mouth. He wipes. He examines the spittle. Nothing. Is he disappointed? He lays the handkerchief on his wide desk behind him and flattens out all the ripples. Three times.

It is 4 am in the morning, Prague, 1924. Kafka's solitary room and the stage are the same space. Desk, chair and window will be transformed into other worlds on this night in the few seconds before Kafka's final curtain.)

KAFKA

I could escape. Why couldn't I?

(squat)

Odessa.

(squat)

Palestine.

(squat)

Amerika.

(squat)

Home of the Free.

Land of the Brave.

Promised Land.

(squat, breath)

Nowhere.

The Theater.

Where we go to die.

Kidding.

(He laughs at his little joke. This turns into a horrible body spasm of coughing. He recovers. He retrieves the handkerchief and wipes his spittle. Blood. He smiles.)

KAFKA

What's the opposite of "die?" Bug.

(He smashes a bug on his desk.)

Live. We who fear to live, do we die any better for it?

(This thought throws him into another coughing fit. He pulls the curtain off its rod and wraps himself in it. He half climbs, half lumbers on top of his desk, knocking over a shaving mirror, a clothes brush, pens, papers, etc. Winter blows in through the window. He cocoons himself in the curtain and disappears. A chrysalis.

He is about to fall into a fevered dream or die, except in that brief nanosecond interval between life and death, or life and dream, or dream and death, suddenly:

a mean violin screams with insistence. Is it music? The light in the window snaps from blue to a deep Chagall red.

A luftmentsh - a man who lives in the clouds - hangs upside down in the window - reminiscent of a Chagall painting - and appears to be playing a violin with inhuman speed. then disappears.

It is Itzhak Löwy, *pronounced Lovey*, of the Yiddish Theatre Troupe standing center stage in a long gabardine.

Kafka realizes he is not in his bedroom but on a stage, and, not unlike a discovered cockroach, scrambles off to get into his seat in the audience.)

LÖWY (trying not to move his lips)

Franz. Franz. You have to give the introductory remarks...

(Kafka stands from his seat and awkwardly returns to the stage.)

KAFKA

Ladies and gentlemen, I am not prepared to give the introductory remarks... but, please, do not be afraid that the performance will be in Yiddish. We all know more Yiddish than we realize. We mustn't fear or be embarrassed by what effect this Eastern theatre may have on us; it is but a fear and embarrassment of something in ourselves...of our own desires and powerlessness...perhaps.

(Kafka has a coughing fit on the stage and crumbles. Löwy gestures to backstage.

Yip and Yap from the Polish Yiddish Theatre Troupe rush onstage and carry Kafka into the wings.)

SONG: I GO BACK

LÖWY

I go back - I go back - I go back
In my long gabardine
With my burning star patch
With my proud walk
At my own command
I go back - I go back - I go back

Dream of Israel, you Zionist fool
Claim Amerika, you Westernized Jew
Enjoy your New Deal Utopia
Give me back my ghetto

Dream of Israel, you Zionist fool
Claim Amerika, you Westernized Jew
Enjoy your New Deal Utopia
Give me back my ghetto

(The red curtain closes.

Löwy continues to sing from behind it, as it shuts on him early.)

In my long gabardine
With my burning star patch
With my proud walk

What? What is going on with the curtain already?

At my own command
I go back - I go back - I go back

(The curtain is opened to reveal Kafka alone on his desk, wrapped in the curtain, as if there had never been a Löwy or a Yiddish Theatre Troupe.)

KAFKA (singing)

Dream of Israel, you Zionist fool
Claim Amerika, you Westernized Jew
Enjoy your New Deal Utopia
Give me back my ghetto.

I go back...

...why am I trembling? The future is racing towards us with an axe!

(Löwy enters and applauds. They laugh at their depth of despair. Kafka coughs.)

KAFKA

I'm not ready.

LÖWY

Few ever are. You must find the scene that will set you free. You are like all us actors, Franz. Just like your little character in that book you wrote. Looking for the scene that will unlock his life. You read to me from your book, about the boychik who gets sent to Amerika...

KAFKA

The Man Who Vanishes...

LÖWY'S

Terrible title. Too abstract. I never told you, Franz, but we took some of your book and put it in a musical play. We call it *Di Amerikanerin*.

KAFKA

You took my book?

LÖWY

Forgive us, I know we didn't ask your permission, but in the Yiddish Theatre we use everything that comes our way. We took only little bits, not the whole thing. It makes for a good cry and a better laugh. God knows we need both. Or He should. If He doesn't, I'm happy to remind Him.

KAFKA

But how did you turn my book into a play? I never wrote the end -

LÖWY

Yes, that was a dramaturgical problem, but we're artists - if we see a problem in our way, a pothole in the road, do we quit, pretend it isn't there? No. We leap. I said someday we must come back to Prague and perform *Di Amerikanerin* for Franz Kafka. Except you died before we could.

KAFKA

I died?

LÖWY

No time to worry about that now. It's time to begin. Places. Places. Everyone. Get ready to begin *Di Amerikanerin* for our dear audience.

(A hubbub of protest is heard offstage. Yip and Yap, dressed as Ma and Pa, and Mrs. Klug dressed as Matta the cook, enter the bedroom/Yiddish stage and stand in a quandary.)

LÖWY

What?

MRS. KLUG

We don't have di Amerikanerin.

YAP

He missed his train. The drunk.

YIP

We're sunk.

LÖWY

Excuse me, Franz.

(Löwy goes to pull the red curtain closed, but the curtain sticks.
He exits the stage in a fit.)

Vamp.

(Yip, Yap and Mrs. Klug look helplessly at Kafka. Kafka giggles.)

KAFKA

Won't my father be upset to learn a Yiddish Theatre company has invaded my bedroom and brought in an audience too.

FATHER'S BOOMING VOICE FROM BEYOND THE DOOR

Mother! Did you see who he allowed in the house! What deviants will he bring home next? We have daughters to protect. If you lay down with dogs, you will wake with fleas!

KAFKA

It is intolerable that my own father! That such men are permitted to exist...

(He wildly opens the door.)

It is you and your kind that are dogs, dogs that no flea would be seen with!

(Löwy enters, pulling on Franklin Katzenjammer.)

LÖWY

Franz, no, you mustn't talk to your father that way. We'll go. We'll go.

KAFKA

You can't go. Who will perform the play if you go? My father is my father, but sometimes you have to knock Jove down if you are to live at all. I won't yell at him again. I'll be good, we can keep the noise down. Where shall I sit?

LÖWY

An Audience of one. But what a one!

KAFKA

Is this our new star?

FRANKIE K

I'm props. I didn't even read the play.

LÖWY

Get him dressed.

(Yip and Yap undress him, dress him, make-up and powder him.)

FRANKIE K

I don't know my lines.

LÖWY

Just keep the play moving along.

FRANKIE K

But what is the play trying to say?

LÖWY

Why concern yourself with what it's trying to say? You're the ingénue.

FRANKIE K

Don't make me play the girl, no, please. I'm easily confused.

KAFKA

Who is this?

LÖWY

His name is Franklin Katzenjammer. Frankie K of our play.

FRANKIE K

(whining) Why me?

LÖWY

Mrs. Klug will play the seductive cook. And Yip and Yap will play your Ma and Pa. Dear audience, be forgiving please, this cherubic boychik here is playing die Amerikanerin for his very first time. Our previous innocent got drunk last night and missed his train and will never be appearing on a stage with Itzhak Löwy ever again, I promise you. But as we haven't the budget for understudies, I present to you Frankie K, a little under-rehearsed it's true, wet behind the ears, but a true talent as anyone can see. Stop fussing. Mrs. Klug will help you along, she knows your lines and where you stand.

(Mrs. Klug gooses Frankie K in his rear.)

FRANKIE K

Hey.

MRS. KLUG

Cute.

LÖWY

My dear audience, I beg your forgiveness for being subjected to these adjustments, but in the last pull our red curtain seems to have stuck in place. And as it is so with our hearts, we on the stage cannot hide anything from you. Are we ready to begin? What is it, Franz?

KAFKA

If I had been prepared to give introductory remarks, I would have wanted to convey my wonder at the powerful dreams the Yiddish Theatre weaves. Until I met you and your kind, I thought only children and the dead dare to dream with such wonderful dark colors and unbridled vitality.

LÖWY

It's time for all to take their seat. Franz?

KAFKA

Yes, I'll take my seat. Until I met you, I never knew I could fall in love with anything Jewish.

LÖWY

Franz, we beg all day in the square to get people in the chairs. Let the play begin. *Di Amerikanerin*. Or how Franz Kafka never got to Amerikaka but our little Frankie K did. Music. Scenery. Actors begin.

SONG: BYE-BYE BAD BOY

MATTA

Your parents must pay
For the cost of the babe-bay
The babe-bay we made
When we made love

FRANKIE K

Where do I go? What do I do?

MATTA

Your parents must pay
For the cost of the babe-bay
The babe-bay we made
When we made love

FRANKIE K

I'm lost.

PARENTS

Bye bye you bad boy
We tried to warn you
Now we disown you

PA (while MA wails)

We packed your box. We booked you passage.
Now you must go your way
Bye bye you bad boy
Your ship is sailing. (Mother - stop wailing.) You must go today
Born our son, you'll die *di Amerikanerin*

FRANKIE K

I'm not the guilty one!

MATTA

You seduced me, you took me by the stairs.

PA

Mama, cover your ears!

MATTA

I want my share!

MA

I had a son. I had a cook. Now I've neither, Life's unfair

(Frankie K fails to sing/speak on cue.)

MA

You broke my heart.

PA

You spooned a tart.

MATTA

You raped me on the stair.

FRANKIE K

She rubbed me
She tubbed me
She touched me on the tummy

...

PA

We packed your box
We booked you passage

FRANKIE K

I told her
Don't touch me
She touched me on the tummy
Tum tum ta tummy
Be my little dummy
...
Uh uh uh
My little tummy
Is feeling funny
What's going on down there?

PA

It's what you get for acting the man.
My disowned son, when you get to
Amerikaka beware!

LÖWY

(Coaching from the wings:) You want to murder
me, like Oedipus. You're unclean.

MA

Clean your nails. Comb your hair.

LÖWY

(Coaching:) You bit my breast, when I
begged for a rest.

LÖWY

Go for laughs, but come back with the pain!

FRANKIE K

What am I guilty of?

MATTA

I...

LÖWY

(Coaching:) You used me just like a man! You DARE lust in front of your mother! I am the
father here. Your father's the beast, he rapes me with stares!

FRANKIE K

Uh uh uh...

(On Mrs. Klug's cue, the Yiddish Troupe exit. Frankie K remains.)

LÖWY

(Doing all the parts:)

I have no son.
I have no cook.
I have no luck.
I'm...

FRANKIE K
I'M NOT THE GUILTY ONE!

(Frankie K beams. Löwy looks offstage.)

LÖWY
I see Mrs. Klug is moving us on to the next scene...

FRANKIE K
How was I?

LÖWY
You were as good as you could be. Terrible. But better than nothing. When you get to Amerikaka, remember to write your mother! Remember us all, little pupick. Oh, you're bound to forget us here, here in our rundown cabaret playing out our sad little dressing room dramas in our tattered underthings. But remember how much you were loved. Send me a card of a Broadway play. Now, off.

FRANKIE K
I'll do better. I promise.

(Frankie K exits. Löwy is left alone on stage. Kafka, in his seat, tries to stand but is too on the verge of tears.)

LÖWY
What? Franz, what is it?

KAFKA
He has no idea what he's signed up for - the innocent. What became of him, Löwy?

LÖWY
No one knows what became of young Franklin Katzenjammer. He went to Amerikaka just like his character in the play. Did he ever write? You mustn't ask me what became of him. Ask God. Ask History. What became of any of us in this century?

(Frankie K enters and grabs the suitcase he forgot.)

FRANKIE K
Sorry. Not here. I forgot. My whole life...

(He grabs the suitcase and exits.)

KAFKA
Wait!

(Frankie K waits, confused.)

KAFKA

I never wrote an end. What happens to you? Do you escape? Vanish? Wait. An ending will come. Be quiet. The world will offer itself to you. Yes, in rapture it will writhe before you.

(Kafka sits at his desk, he is alone in his room. The others on stage stop and wait.
Kafka sits. He suddenly embraces and kisses his desk.)

When the world offers itself to you, will you embrace her, one hand under her waist, the other...it's only at 4am alone at my desk I know where I am, if only I could offer something - what? - in return...

(Kafka takes Frankie K's hand, looking for his answer. A whistle is heard offstage.
All but Kafka, Lowy and Frankie K exit.)

LÖWY

An ending, Franz! Go back to your desk and write us a better ending to our play *Di Amerikanerin*. The audience, Franz, we must not forget our dear audience. What a nice audience you are. We humbly present our next scene: Frankie K...

FRANKIE K

Mister, I have to go.

(Frankie K exits. Löwy steps in from the wings, pulling the red curtain closed.)

LÖWY

We humbly present our next scene: Frankie K on the good ship *Kafkania Arkadia*. Let's open the curtain. Reveal the wound...

(Löwy opens the red curtain to reveal, to his consternation, Kafka still at his desk. A cut-out ship rail has been placed on it, and Yip and Yap are hurrying to set Frankie K in place at the rail. Kafka ignores all and tries to write at his desk. Mrs. Klug enters as the moon. Löwy accepts all and exits. Yip and Yap stay to create ocean ambiance.)

FRANKIE K

When they said the ocean was vast, I didn't know they meant VAST vast. And no one said it moved back and forth with THIS much velocity. When I try to close my eyes to sleep, it's as if the cook's big thighs rise up under me, lifting me up and pushing me down - if you ask me, lovesickness and seasickness are the same thing. What do you think, Mister? Mister? Oh - are you trying to concentrate?

KAFKA

I am trying to be completely quiet and alone.

FRANKIE K

Oh. Why?

KAFKA

So the world will offer itself to me.

FRANKIE K

Oh. But the world won't come to you - you have to go to it!

KAFKA

Who taught you that? I'll never get anything done with you rocking like that.

FRANKIE K

But you're not doing anything...

KAFKA

I am fighting for my life!

(Kafka explodes into a fit of coughing. It subsides, finally.)

I am fighting for my life.

FRANKIE K

You're such an actor.

(Kafka is silent and interior. Frankie K softly sings, so as not to aggravate.)

I'm a Yankee Doodle Dandy
A Yankee Doodle do or die...
o, say can you see, by the dawn's early light...l'chayim!

(Kafka becomes more silent and more interior.)

Have you ever been to Amerikaka? Have you ever been to Amerikaka? Have you ever been to Amerikaka? Have you ever been to Amerikaka? Have you ever been to Amerikaka?

KAFKA

Travel upsets me.

FRANKIE K

Will they make me speak Kaka in Amerikaka? Will they make me speak Kaka in Amerikaka? Will they...

KAFKA

Yes, it's their native tongue.

FRANKIE K

I thought the native tongue was Red Injun.

(He is answered with silence.)

I'm excited to be starting a new life in Amerikaka. I'm excited to...

KAFKA

A new life, yes.

FRANKIE K

It's not by choice, I must admit. I have no idea what my new life will be. I like it already. Exile is exciting. (He sings:)

In every land, in every place
Adam and Eve have had to face
A life of exile and despair
Homeless strangers everywhere

I'm going to be sick...

(Yap holds a bucket in which Frankie is sick.)

KAFKA

Please go below. Please go anywhere but here.

FRANKIE K

Would you have me jump into the water and drown? Let it be on your head if I do.

KAFKA

I can't take responsibility for what happens to you.

FRANKIE K

That's exactly what my parents said...

KAFKA

All my life I could never sleep. I couldn't eat. I couldn't work. And now this boychik chatterbox won't permit me to die in quiet.

FRANKIE K

I'm not a chatterbox. I do have a box though. It's all I have.

KAFKA

Are you mad I never wrote you an end? Is that what you want? I can.

FRANKIE K

But I'm at my beginning...

(Kafka picks up his pen. Frankie K bursts into tears. Yip, Yap and Mrs. Klug all stare at Kafka in condemnation.)

MRS. KLUG

Brute.

OFFSTAGE LÖWY'S VOICE

Franz! You've stopped the show cold. Everyone, on to the next scene.

(Yip and Yap and Mrs. Klug the Moon exit. Frankie keeps his sick bucket. Frankie K stands still, waiting to see if Kafka will begin. Kafka waits for Frankie K to exit.)

KAFKA

You need to go. Please, don't let me upset you.

FRANKIE K

I don't know where I'm to go. They don't tell me...

KAFKA

What's going to become of you?

FRANKIE K

Why does something have to become of me?

KAFKA

There are hidden planes of existence and spheres of being that are not visible to a young innocent like you. The end is racing towards us with an ax.

FRANKIE K

I'm glad I have no idea what you just said.

KAFKA

You do. You nodded while I spoke.

FRANKIE K

I always nod.

(Yip and Yap breeze on and grab Frankie K and the scene props.)

Oh, I have to go.

KAFKA

Why go when there is no escape?

FRANKIE K

I like you. You make me laugh.

(Yip and Yap exit with Frankie K and the scene props.)

LÖWY

Dear patient audience, we take great pleasure in presenting the next scene of *Die Amerikanerin*: Frankie K begs for his Landing Card in the land of Liberty. And I have convinced the Company through threats and tears to play it in the new style: Modern Puppet Progressivism. We might be from the shtetl, but we can still be on the cutting edge!

(Yip and Yap have been setting up the next scene: Ellis island. Frankie K is under review to get his Landing Card. A tribunal sits; it is suggested the tribunal be created through some type of puppetry or oversized masks. Löwy is part of the tribunal. Frankie stands in front of it shifting his weight from foot to foot. An interpreter stands to his side.)

TRIBUNAL

Kaff ka ka.

(Frankie desperately thumbs through his *How to Speak Kafka in One Hundred and One Easy Lessons for Everyone*.)

Kee ka ka?

FRANKIE K

- uh- uh - kee - uh - uh -

(The tribunal explodes into a riot of laughter and have to regain control of themselves.)

TRIBUNAL

KAH KAF KA

INTERPRETER

Kee

Kee

Kee

FRANKIE K

Um. Uh. Help me.

I studied my kaka.

But I can't hear it when it's said out loud.

TRIBUNAL

KAHF- KAH-KAH!

Say you're from Poland like I did. You're now countryless, so it's best just to claim one. The countryless are seen as scum and scavengers here. If you claim you're a scum or scavenger they won't give you a landing card.

- uh- uh - kee - uh - uh -

Zich ick ben Kopolandland.

Ya. Ick ben Kopolandlandickkaka.

KKKKKKKKKKKKKKKKKKKK.

They're not going to give you a landing card...

Help me.

Kee kee kee kee
Zich-ben-ich litkla nick!

Une litkla nick!
Yah!
HAHAHAHAHAHAHA!

What did you say?

I told them you made a joke about your little ick-ben-ich. Smile and laugh along. You're in.

Une litkla nick!
Yah!
HAHAHAHAHAHAHA!

(Frankie K manufactures his first Kafkanian smile.) Good robust laughter all around. Even Frankie K joins in. They raise their big stamps to stamp his Landing Card. Frankie is so happy he starts to cry and hugs the Interpreter and buries his wet face into his chest. But he does not pull away, and keeps himself buried in the Interpreter's chest until it becomes an embarrassment. He pries Frankie K off him. Frankie goes to shake and kiss the hands of the tribunal.)

INTERPRETER

Stop acting old world! We don't get kissy and overly grateful here. Stand up straight and be strong. You're an Amerikanerin now.

FRANKIE K

Will you take me home? I like you.

TRIBUNAL

KA KA KAT?

INTERPRETER

Answer. Get this right.

TRIBUNAL

KA KA KAT?

INTERPRETER

Profession?

FRANKIE K

Oh! I know how to say this in Kafkanian:

ACHKTORFKA!

(Horror seizes the tribunal.)

TRIBUNAL

ACH NEIN!

FRANKIE K

ACH KAT?

INTERPRETER

Denied!

(All disappear but Frankie K with his box.)

FRANKIE K

Wait! What happened? At least audition me...you have to at least audition...I have two contrasting monologues prepared...please...you can't send me back...you have to give me a chance...I beg you...

(He sets the box down and sits on it, defeated, and mopes.)

I beg you...

(Löwy walks in and stares at Frankie K on his box.)

KAFKA

Never beg. No. That's no way to begin...

LÖWY

Oy, you call that begging, peh. Get angry. Show some fire -

FRANKIE K

You're not in this scene.

LÖWY

Make way, make way. I'll show you.

(Frankie K steps off the box. Löwy stands on it and smiles. Everyone backstage, in whatever manner of dress they are in, come from the wings to watch him.)

Remember, you are one of the privileged. It's a privilege to beg. A privilege to be refused. But the best never beg to get, the best beg to give! Kind audience, please, may I trouble you with a song?

(Those gathered applaud, shout out "No's!" knowing this is Löwy's famous *Schnorrer Song* where they can shout "NO" back to him. (* = crowd response)

Allow me to treat you to a poem? (No!*) Bother you with an old stale joke? (No!*) Two? (No!*) Push you to the wall with a rant about the war? (No!*) I beg of you...

SONG: SCHNORRER

LÖWY

Take my heart
My heart
Tied to a string
Gelatinous thing
Please, accept my humble offering
No? No. No!

Schnorrer of the world
You may not
You may not give us anything
O, the privilege to be refused
By those with everything to lose
The privilege to be a Jew
What say you (NO!*)

Might I recite? (No!*) Sing a ding-a-ling? (No!*) Give me a chance. Let me dance. Drop my pants. No? I beg you please. I'm on my knees. No? No? Nothing then? My life must end. Please? Pretty please? Permitta-me to beg! Yes...? Thank You, Up Above, the answer's no again!

Schnorrer of the world
You may not
You may not give us anything
O, the privilege to be refused
By those with everything to lose
The privilege to be a Jew
What say you (No! No! No!*)

Amateurs beg to get. But an artist schnorrer. An ARTIST - he begs to give.

(Kafka in the audience stands up applauding with unexpected enthusiasm. He walks onstage.)

Company, we were far from good yet this man of letters loved us. Take us out for a drink, what do you say? Everyone, meet the man who sees through the false of our poverty and to the truth of our humble stage. He asks for the honor to treat us to drinks down at the cabaret.

(All applaud, as they undress and hijink and grope and laugh and slap in front of Franz to his blushing delight and averting gaze.)

KAFKA

Mr. Löwy, please forgive me if I say I never fell in love with anything Jewish until seeing you on the stage today. When I sat in the dark that first time, waiting for your entrance, I had to summon all my strength to remain in my chair, to refrain from giggling. The sight of the boychik up on the stage doing something completely real, something so purely one's self, made me want to explode with a violent ejaculation.

LÖWY

To the tavern!

(All exit except Kafka. He coughs.

Frankie K. enters, dragging his box through Amerikaka.

Yip and Yap follow Frankie K. Yip and Yap approach Frankie K. They speak in Kaka. The translation is in parenthesis.)

YIP

Kafkah koo kee kah? (*You just get off the boat?*)

YAP

Kaka keefka? (*You looking for a place?*)

YIP

Kakahkeekoo? (*You looking for a job?*)

FRANKIE K

Klahma Frankie. I'm an actor. Acktorfka.

YIP

Acktorfka! Koo kee kr k-nyt koo kee. (*To be or...etc.*)

(Yap applauds Yip in appreciation, whistles, and slaps Frankie K on the back.)

YIP

Kaf kah? (*You need help with that?*)

FRANKIE K

Thank you, but I must learn how to manage on my own...

(Yip and Yap whisk the box over their heads and exit knocking into Kafka as they go.)

My box! Wait. Wait for me! Kahft! Kahft!

(Frankie K plows into Kafka as he chases the two thieves and exits.)

KAFKA

You poor innocent...what petty terrors wait for each of us...?

(Kafka recovers from the knock. The red curtain opens revealing his bedroom. A grandmotherly factory worker, a Babushka, is seated in front of his desk. She sits as if his bedroom is the office at the insurance company.)

I'm terribly sorry...I had a rough morning...I am so sorry to have kept you waiting...please forgive me...where is your claim form, how strange, I know I filled it out yesterday...oh, are you the secret scene I need to play so I can go free?

(He searches among the papers on his desk.)

BABUSHKA

Mr. Kafka, please, be good to me, I am sorry to bother you...

KAFKA

I was wrong to keep you waiting...you must forgive me, and now I've misplaced your insurance papers, *The Man Who Vanishes*? What are these notebooks doing here...?

BABUSHKA

I was hurt sorting out the spindles before the blade at the factory. The wood slipped and my left arm was pulled into the cutting path. I know it must be my own fault for not being more careful, but...

KAFKA

You are not at fault...

BABUSHKA

Yes, yes, I'm sorry, to be such a bother...

KAFKA

You have suffered needlessly, don't you see...

BABUSHKA

Yes, yes, I'm to blame...

KAFKA

Sweet little mother babushka, I will file your claim and see that it is not lost. Come next week and you will be paid for the grievance that...

BABUSHKA

Is it true you exist, an insurance man who sees to it the hurt get care? May God send you an angel when you most need one.

KAFKA

I don't believe in angels, but that's no reason you should suffer.

BABUSHKA

That's no reason you should suffer. Make a leap, Mr. Kafka. Suffering is just a pothole in the road. Jump over them.

KAFKA

Keep this receipt of your claim.

BABUSHKA

Are you listening to me, pupick?

KAFKA

I have a tremendous pothole in my head.

BABUSHKA

Leap, Mr. Kafka, leap.

KAFKA

Leap out of my head?

(Yip and Yap run on with box pursued by Frankie K. They run in circles around the desk. Kafka tries to concentrate on Babushka, who does not see the chase happening.)

FRANKIE K

Kahft! Kahft!

KAFKA

Shoo shoo...

FRANKIE K

Kahft! Kahft!

BABUSHKA

I'm a bother, I know, thank you for seeing me.

KAFKA

Excuse me, one minute...

BABUSHKA

I must get back to the factory, Mr. Kafka...

(Kafka grabs the box from Yip and Yap who stop – stupefied.)

KAFKA

This doesn't belong to you - now shoo before I call in the Law.

(Yip and Yap exit. Frankie K is reunited with his box. He checks its contents.)

FRANKIE K

Thanks, Mister...o, thank you.

KAFKA

Don't forget your receipt...

BABUSHKA

Thank you, Mr. Kafka. You remember, what I said.

KAFKA

Who's going to watch out for you...?

BABUSHKA

The potholes. My husband, God watch his soul, tried to leap over a pothole in the middle of the road, can you imagine such a thing, and fell flat on his face on the other side. A horse carriage rode right over him. Amschel, I cried, why didn't you just walk round? O, that man. I love him still. You remind me of him. Except you remind me of a bird as well. God sends even to those who don't believe.

FRANKIE K

I met a great girl.

BABUSHKA

Aren't we the fortunate ones?

(Babushka exits.)

FRANKIE K

Her name's Mary Anne. I met a great girl. Her name's Mary Anne. She's crazy about the movies, madcap matinees. She wears face powder, slouches in a hundred cute ways. And, oh! Oh! Oh! She possesses the most incredible Amerikanerin words. Lingo, don't you know. Not a lick. Let her rip. Lollapalooza. Dilly keen. Are you kosher? Yes, I am. Oh! Oh! Oh! She's so cheerful! Speaking a lingo I don't understand. She sews in a factory. That's for now, bow wow, she's got a plan. She's going to set up her own hatshop like pow. Do you know what she enjoys the most? Holding hands! Holding hands. Life is grand when you're an Amerikanerin girl named Mary Anne. Holding hands!

(Yip and Yap roll on a platform that carries Mary Anne at a sewing machine. She is in the sewing factory, oblivious to her surroundings as she works. A spotlight hits her.)

FRANKIE K

Here she is! Here she is! The sewing girl I was telling you about...

SONG: THE SEWING GIRL

MARY ANNE

I sew all week, to make ends meet
Needles hurt, my fingers bleed
Sew sew sew sew sew
Save save save
One ticket, please
I take my seat
Curtain rise!

No rouge for me, I'll pinch my cheeks
No dinner meat, no ice cream treat
Sew sew sew sew sew
Save save save
One ticket, please
I take my seat
Curtain rise!

Imagine me
Up on the stage
King, villain, heroine
Saying all the lines
Love. Rage.
That's me. Yes, that's me

Dancing
Up on the stage.
Behind their eyes.
Behind their eyes.

Sew sew sew sew sew
Save save save
One ticket, please
I come alive
Spirits rise!

(Löwy rolls Mary Anne offstage.)

KAFKA

Marry her.

FRANKIE K

You think? But I'm so young. I've still so much to see. I've been reading cowboy stories.

KAFKA

Cowboy stories?

FRANKIE K

Not one of them gets married, not one.

KAFKA

You need someone...

FRANKIE K

When do I get to see her again? Mister? Are you going to write we meet again? Or send me West? There's so much in front of me!

KAFKA

There's the only thing in front of you: your death.

FRANKIE K

You're a funny one. I'm going to write her a beautiful letter!

(Frankie K runs off dragging his box with him.)

KAFKA

A beautiful letter? Yes, I'll write...

(Kafka, now alone, sits at his desk to write a letter, he writes furiously, letter upon letter. He collapses on his desk, alone, spent from his letter-writing fury.

Kafka is asleep on a letter. His three sisters enter on tiptoe and slip out a letter from under him.)

ELLI

It's a letter.

VALLI

A letter?

OTTLA

Oooh, a letter.

ELLI

To Felice! He's written Felice! He wants to marry her! Ohhhhh...

Happiness! SISTERS

Uh-Oh. ELLI

What uh-oh? VALLI

Conditions. ELLI

Boo, big brother, boo. OTTLA

Restrictions... ELLI

No raisins? No almonds? OTTLA

Limits...boundaries... ELLI

No honey treats? No lambkin bleat?! OTTLA

Sacrifice. Each word carries the weight of all the world. ELLI

Rip it. Rip it. VALLI

Wait - let's edit it. A little bit...my dove who coos. OTTLA

My sun and moon. ELLI

Sweet myrrh upon my fingertips. VALLI

I press my lips... ELLI

. VALLI
 ...upon your downy nape...

OTTLA
 Kiss kiss kiss!

ELLI/VALLI
 Shh, shh, shh!

ELLI
 I have no woe.

VALLI
 No bliss.

ELLI
 No life. Without...

VALLI
 You in it.

OTTLA
 Kiss kiss kiss!

ELLI/VALLI
 Shh, shh, shhh!

OTTLA
 Would it kill you to write kiss kiss kiss? (*She rhapsodes:*)
 I will sing the song of all songs to Solomon

ELLI/VALLI/OTTLA
 That he may smother me with kisses.

KAFKA
 (*Murmurs in his sleep:*) If you find my beloved, will you not tell him that I am faint with love?

ELLI
 Smother...

VALLI
 Smother...

OTTLA
 Smother...

ELLI/VALLI/OTTLA

Smother me with kisses...

KAFKA

I...

SISTERS

Refreshes me with raisins. Revives me with apricots; I am faint with love.

KAFKA

Which sin is it I must fight most of all? The sin of Lust, isn't it?

SISTERS

Nooooooooooooooooooooo....

(Loud sex sounds spring out from behind the curtain. Kafka opens the window curtains. Puppets with Kafka's face are figures playing Vater and Mutter Kafka engaged in loud awkward sex. Their voices most likely supplied by Löwy. Kafka is snapped out of his reverie.)

KAFKA

Mutter!

MUTTER

Vater! Vater!

VATER

Ya?

MUTTER

Kafkachik!

VATER

I AM DIE VATER HERE.

ELLI/VALLI/OTTLA/MUTTER/SHEPHERDESS

Smother me with.....

KAFKA

Anahhhhhhhh....Nnnn out out out.

(Kafka closes the window curtains to prevent a violent ejaculation and chases everyone out of his room and ends up sprawled on his desk.)

Nnnahhhh...

(Kafka grabs the white window curtain and wraps himself in it. He is near tears.
Löwy enters through the window.)

LÖWY

My friend? What has upset you?

KAFKA

Life. (They laugh in appreciation.)

(He recites from a play:) “What is a man in life? His days are empty. His nights are a void. His occupations are vanity. His life is like a chaotic dream. But ‘til the time of his death, he lives in hope of the world’s embrace.”

My family is shocked that I am producing an evening of Yid recitations and Yid songs. They know how difficult it is for me to do anything public at all. But I want everyone to experience you, every Jew must hear your recitation of *God, Man and Devil*. At least once, before he dies!

LÖWY

That’s right. You don’t just come to Yiddish Theatre to see what’s new, or a star, or a play, or a pretty girl, you come for the sake of theatre itself. Nothing else can fill you up. Why?

(Babuska enters to mop and eventually bangs her mop against his feet.)

Because we know who we are. It’s not only the stars that pierce the firmament, but also our love. You understand, yes, Franz? What is with the mopping?

BABUSHKA

You will sit down. I have a story to tell.

LÖWY

I have not finished talking about the theatre.

BABUSHKA

Quiet you. I was a star on the Yiddish Stage before you were a twinkle twinkle in my eye. Laugh cry shout - I did it all - I did Mama Lear in Yiddish - howl howl oh how I howled to make the rafters cry. But I got big with my little lumpkin here and I left the stage. And then he left me to howl howl all alone in my empty hovel in Kracow.

LÖWY

Mama. Mama, we are in Prague. You cannot do your mumble jumble Babushka shtick here.

(She grabs Löwy by the ear and bends him over her knee.)

MAMA! Franz! The curtain. Pull the curtain.

(Kafka pulls the curtain. He listens to the elaborate sounds of a spanking.
Babushka emerges from behind the curtain and looks at him. He jumps back.)

BABUSKA

May you be delivered into the Higher Spirits which will save you from your self.

(She opens the curtain to reveal Felice floating on air in the window.)

Talk to this nice girl. She doesn't believe in happiness either. You're perfect. Talk.

KAFKA

Do you go to the theater?

FELICE

Yes. It's the only place where I feel I am permitted to feel all the things I am always feeling.

(No response. Babushka prods Kafka.)

KAFKA

Yes, me too. It makes me wild and senseless.

(Babushka has to prod Felice.)

FELICE

Yes, me too.

BABUSHKA

Matchmaking. I'd rather mop.

(She exits.)

KAFKA

Should one go to the theater if it troubles the soul?

FELICE

I often feel most alive when I'm troubled. But I also liked the funny parts too. In the play. And the songs.

(Frankie K and Mary Anne come skipping onto the stage, holding hands, carrying his box between them and do a courting dance inspired by the Chagall painting of the kiss, where love twists your head around and lifts you off your feet.)

KAFKA

I fall in love with actors on the stage. They always seem so unafraid. But I suspect they're even more terrified than we can imagine, but they brave their terror and let their hearts sing of such wonderful dark possibilities.

FELICE

Yes. Brave dark possibilities.

KAFKA

If I were an actor I could tear my soul away from myself and raise a corner of the great curtain itself. There's no better way to forget your plight then falling in love...with actors in light.

FELICE

Oh. Falling in love with a writer would be so nice.

KAFKA

I sell insurance.

FELICE

Your friend says you write beautiful letters. WOULD you ever write me a letter?

KAFKA

Yes, I write. At 4am. At my desk. It keeps me chained to my horrid life, but without it, I'd float away, vanish...

FELICE

Please don't vanish.

KAFKA

I don't believe in marriage.

FELICE

Oh.

KAFKA

But maybe we may get married one day. Yes, I'll write you letters.

(Letters fall from the sky. Felice pulls more letters out from her bosom.)

FELICE

Oh. I accept. I will marry you.

KAFKA

My letters didn't frighten you?

FELICE

Are you looking for a nice comfortable apartment for the two of us?

(She sits at his desk.)

KAFKA

You can't just enter my room whenever you like!

FELICE

I saw some nice dark oak furniture that would be...

KAFKA

How can I live with dark heavy furniture?

FELICE

The furniture is at a very good price...

KAFKA

You can't just enter whenever you like!

FELICE

When we meet in person, why do you never act like the man who writes me letters? When we meet in person, that man always vanishes.

KAFKA

I have hundreds of wrong feelings. They talk to each other incessantly.

FELICE

I told myself, you mustn't get angry because he's odd, it's because he's odd that you are in love with him.

(We hear the buzzing of Kafka's sisters)

OTTLA

Felice.

ELLI/VALLI/OTTLA

Our new sister.

VALLI

She's your happiness.

FELICE

Poor little immigrant in the land of love, it's a new country for him, yes, take him in. He's unschooled and a sophisticate. Savage and lettered. Hopeless, yet thoughtful too.

ELLI/VALLI/OTTLE

Marry her.

KAFKA

Incessantly.

OTTLA

Bug.

KAFKA

And I must listen to each one -

VALLI

Bug.

KAFKA

- in case one right feeling has been thrown in with all the wrong.

ELLI/VALLI

Bug.

KAFKA

Being alone brings nothing but punishment, but never to be alone again? Every morning I go to the insurance company to settle claims. I must insure against wrong feeling, mustn't I?

FELICE

Here, hold my hand.

KAFKA

I fell in love with an eighteen year old Swiss girl in the sanatorium.

FELICE

Did you hold her hand?

KAFKA

She was such a frail trembling thing.

FELICE

And I'm healthy as a horse, except for my headaches and inability to sleep, which I caught from you. Did you kiss her? Did you? Was she a shiksa?

KAFKA

Yes.

ELLI/VALLI/OTTLA

BUG!

(Kafka tries to smash a bug over and over.)

KAFKA

There's a tremendous pain in my head...why did you insist on heavy furniture?

SISTERS

No!

FELICE

Why do you insist on living here with your father and mother?

SISTERS

She's your love!

KAFKA

I live with my father and mother to punish them for bringing me into their faithless world.

SISTERS

Escape!

FELICE

We can marry and go to Amerika. New York City. You can be free of the pain in your head. Don't you want to be free, Franz?

KAFKA

Franz Kafka in Amerika? Amerikanerins do everything they can to prove life isn't tragic and then they walk around in a daze wondering what is missing, and so they build skyscrapers and highways and shiny useless things.

FELICE

In Amerika, everyone is free, there's no history, no tragedies.

KAFKA

I can't imagine such a thing.

FELICE

Marriage?

KAFKA

O, Felice...

(The sisters beat him like a bug.)

SISTERS

BUGGGGGGGGGGGGG!

No raisins for you!

Boo,

Boo.

(They exit. Felice takes Franz's hand.)

FELICE

What is it you need?

KAFKA

I need only the smallest details of reality to live. Nothing more.

FELICE

I do not want to be one of the smallest details of reality. I want to loom large! Like the twentieth century!

(Foghorns, boat bells and gulls are heard. Seagulls fly up to the window and are gone. A speck in the distance appears. It grows larger as it zooms towards the window. It's the Statue of Liberty! It's the 20th Century! It's going to crash through the window and into the audience! Wagnerian music overwhelms. This can all be done with paper and lights or some other obvious theatrical gimmick.

Liberty breaks through the frame of the window with a grim determined look on her face. In her upraised arm she holds a gleaming sword.

Kafka stumbles backwards in fear. A red curtain is pulled (or falls) in front of her and the desk. Kafka falls through the curtain.

A hand and eye peer out from behind the red curtain: Frankie K.)

FRANKIE K

Mister, are you okay?

KAFKA

I'm fighting for my life..

FRANKIE K

We have to do the next scene in the play, if you could...

(Kafka scurries to his seat in the audience. The curtain opens. A drop falls. On the drop is a picture of a road in Omaha, Nebraska with the sign: "New Deal Make It Real Traveling Theatre of Omahaw. Welcome. Walk Ins Welcome. Everyone Welcome. Enter and Be Employed!" Behind the sign is a painted drop and rows of high standing angels. Frankie K enters dragging his box. Frankie K sees the sign, sets the box down, and sits on it. He is sweaty and tired from dragging it from the station. He stares at the sign, then at Kafka.)

FRANKIE K

What a beautiful morning in Amerikaka. I hope it's true...I think they spelled it wrong...hey Mister, I think you spelled Omaha wrong.

KAFKA

I apologize...

(The Babushka enters, mopping. Kafka hides behind the program.
She bangs against Frankie K's box.)

FRANKIE K

Do you know if they're still hiring here? Where do I stand in line? Is there a safe place to leave my box? I'm willing to take any job, even yours, I've no ego that way, I promise you, but I will make good on whatever it is I'm hired to do. I saw the signs in New York City and came on the train. I didn't know it would be a thirty hour ride. I'm an actor. I sing and dance too.

BABUSHKA

I mop.

(The Great Babushka exits mopping. Löwy pops his head out from under the drop.)

LÖWY

Pssst, pssst, little bugger, over here.

FRANKIE K

O no, not you. Go away. I want to be part of the New Deal Traveling Theatre and if I'm seen with you, I won't be hired for sure.

LÖWY

I've got a joke for you, you're going to burst.

FRANKIE K

I don't like your jokes. Shoo shoo.

LÖWY

Listen, you shnuk, I love you as if you were my own chubby little bubbeleh, and you tell me to shoo. I know I'm from the shtetl, I know I don't belong here in your Amerikaka, but who are you to say shoo? Do you think it's easy keeping the Yiddish Theatre alive with Zionism, assimilation and genocide biting me in the backside? What's it to you, you're Di Amerikanerin now. Never mind, don't you worry, I won't be back to bother you again.

(He disappears under the drop. We hear Löwy's voice from behind the drop.)

I go back - I go back - I go back
In my long gabardine

KAFKA/FRANKIE K

Don't go, Löwy.

FRANKIE K

I don't know why I said those things I said...

LÖWY

With my burning star patch
With my proud walk
At my own command
I go back - I go back – I -

(From behind the curtain, Löwy starts sobbing. Frankie K gets embarrassed.)

KAFKA

Itzhak?

(Kafka carefully opens the curtain. Itzhak sits alone.)

Where's your company, Itzhak? Where's Mrs. Klug?

LÖWY

That cow? I hope I never see her and her cud-chewing husband again.

KAFKA

Never see her again? She's the blondzhende shtern. She's the Bartered Bride.

LÖWY

Lowlifes, two bit talents who refuse to scale the highest heights because it might take some real effort and sacrifice - why ask more of our audience when we can do bits and get easy laughs - They all quit. They went to Minsk.

FRANKIE K

Not me. I went to Amerikaka!

KAFKA

But I brought flowers to throw to Mrs. Klug.

LÖWY

Is that all my art meant to you? I was a pimp for you and that beastly pair of tits? And now you abandon me in my state of heartbreak and ruin? Give me those. I wish these were her.

(He takes the flowers and rends them into bits. Then he collapses into sobs.)

She turned my whole company against me. I'm ruined.

(He jumps up.)

LÖWY

Let them go to Minsk. They'll get hollered off the stage. Not us. Here in Prague, with my good friend Franz Kafka by my side, we'll score a triumph that will make the floods of Noah seem like too little tears. We'll do a new play: *The Golem*. I'll play the Rabbi, and you'll be the creature I create out of clay. That way you won't have any lines.

KAFKA

I can't act the Golem in front of an audience. I wouldn't know how to begin.

LÖWY

Make-up! He knows no God. He's alone in the world. He lives a life of pain and shame. He's a lump of clay. Just be you, Franz. You'll be great.

(Frankie has turned Kafka into the Golem. He and Löwy are instantly in the play *The Golem*. Löwy is suddenly dressed as an alchemist and Rabbi and smears red clay on the face of a physically transformed Kafka.)

I made you, I gave you life, forgive me. I also poured my hate of our enemies into you. A monster to hate those who hate us every day. A monster made by a Jew. Sweet Golem, this is a most terrible day.

You murdered the Cossack who hurt my innocent daughter. A hundred more Cossacks will soon be at the synagogue door. Sweet murderous Golem, I am the guilty one. I created you from clay to do what no Jew should do. Creation and vengeance are not meant for man. But I was angry. You. You are my guilt and shame. My greatest love. You fear the world. I do too. But. Into it you must go. You. A monster made by a Jew. Roam the world. Never return.

Here is my cloak.

(He gives him his cloak.)

And here is my beard. Now, go. Disappear. Be gone. Shoo. Escape your fate.

(He gives him his fake beard.)

Walk out the gates of our ghetto. Go, horrid love. Go. Disappear. Be gone. Shoo.

(Golem/Kafka does not move.)

Let I who made you suffer the martyrs fate. I give you freedom. Make your escape. Too-de-loo...what's wrong?

(Golem/Kafka does not exit but becomes overcome with sobbing.)

LÖWY/LOEW

My precious hate, my lump of fear. What is it you want to say?

(Golem/Kafka shakes his fists and cries out.)

GOLEM/KAFKA

Grrrarrrrhhhhhhh.

LÖWY/LOEW

What moves you so? Hate! No? What?

(Golem/Kafka leaps up and hits Löwy with his soft fists and then throws his arms around Löwy, sobbing.)

What. Is it...Love?

(The sobbing subsides. They kiss each other's hands and cheeks.)

O pitiful Godless thing who know no God. O you, my misshapen son. Never to know a mother's love. Listen close. I am not a messenger from Him Most High Above. I am not your mother. I am but a beggar, Still I know every lump of clay can become a creator of his own destiny. Listen to me, lumpkin. Freedom. Right or wrong. Alone or hunted. Loved or feared. Be a free creature of your own free will.

(Golem/Kafka cries out in a terrible happiness and runs towards the audience. The curtain falls but Kafka is in front of it. Kafka stares out at the audience. Petrified.

Frankie K steps out from behind the curtain.)

FRANKIE K

Mister. Mister!

(Kafka stands there embarrassed. He looks at the audience. He scurries behind the curtain.)

Intermission.

(Intermission.)

ACT TWO

(As the audience returns from intermission, the Babushka is mopping the stage in front of the red curtain. She rests. Kafka enters, apologetically, and sits in the house.

Houselights off, lights up on the red curtain.

Löwy's voice is heard:)

LÖWY'S VOICE

Franz. Franz. You have to give the introductory remarks...

KAFKA

I'm still not prepared to give the introductory remarks...Itzhak, I want to say I'd like to embrace the mystical, but the Yiddish structure in this play baffles me...if only time were constant or...the future...

LÖWY

(Löwy enter's Kafka's room through the window.) Thank you for your wonderful introduction, Franz. What you did for us tonight at the Cafe Savoy, putting up posters, bringing your friends, filling the house, it is too much, we are in your debt.

KAFKA

Do the speech. You know the one. My favorite. Hershele. The poor man from *God, Man and Devil*.

(Löwy readies himself as Hershele, the man in *God, Man and Devil*.)

LÖWY as HERSHELE

I did not realize how very alone, how isolated I'd become - it's exactly

(Kafka starts mouthing the words as Löwy speaks and is drwn up on the stage with him:)

as if I look into a dark emptiness -

KAFKA

- an abyss -

LÖWY as HERSHELE

an abyss - a frightful nothingness.

KAFKA AND LÖWY as HERSHELE

I'm afraid. I'm afraid to live.

(Kafka applauds and trembles with delight.)

LÖWY as HERSHELE

Yet all that wills and strives must die.

KAFKA as LÖWY as HERSHELE

And we who fear to live, do we die any better for it?

LÖWY

Ah hah. All I know is nothing's certain in this world. Nor on the stage. We are cheated, thrown into exile, through no fault of our own. My own father disowned me because I joined the theatre.

KAFKA

I've missed you. Why didn't you and your troupe return to Prague?

LÖWY

Why didn't you Western Jews bring us back? Were we too heymish for your goyish tastes? Were our ticket prices too high? Was a piece of bread too much to ask for the great repertory of plays acted by us poor payats beholden to Him above?

KAFKA

When I sat in the dark that first time, waiting for your entrance, I had to summon all my strength to remain in my chair, to refrain from giggling. The sight of you up on the stage doing something completely real, something so purely one's self, made me want to explode with a violent ejaculation.

(He realizes what he has said and gets embarrassed in front of the audience.)

LÖWY

Too kind. Too kind. And...Act Two of our play: *Die Amerikaneron!*

(The New Deal Traveling Theatre of Omahaw drop falls in place. Frankie K enters.)

FRANKIE K

No vermin anywhere. This is the happiest place on earth, they say.

KAFKA

You're happy here?

FRANKIE K

Who wouldn't be? Well, you.

KAFKA

What do you possess?

FRANKIE K

I have my box.

KAFKA

Hang on to it. With your teeth, if you have to. Otherwise you're lost. What you possess, hang on to it. What does it hold?

FRANKIE K

A second suit. One photograph. A hard salami.

KAFKA

Everything the world wants to take from you. Without these things, it can annihilate you with a single sneeze.

FRANKIE K

If you ask me, this box is the only thing holding me back. I should chuck it and trust to Providence.

KAFKA

That's no way to think at all. You must never be separated. If they cut off your hands, grip it with your teeth. If they knock those out, with your gums. Realize: without a love, income, or something all your own, a landlady's lifted eyebrow, a supervisor's cough, a clerk's simple no can completely bring down your world. Any trivial moment may tear you out of yourself and toss you to the gnawing winds of indifferent history. So hold on. Hold on to the few things you know that are yours.

FRANKIE K

Do you have a box?

KAFKA

If I had any strength, I'd grab you and bind your wrists to your ankles and stuff you into your box this very minute. I'd close the lid, lock the lock, and sit on top, and feel the calm of knowing no harm could come to you as long as you couldn't escape. Then there'd be no need to be afraid that you and your second suit, your parent's photograph or your hard salami would be separated.

FRANKIE K

How did you know it was a photograph of my parents?

KAFKA

I knew. May I buy it from you? Fifty cents?

FRANKIE K

Fifty? Sounds good to me.

(He gives him the photograph and pockets the two quarters.)

Never refuse profitability.

(Kafka rips up the photograph. Frankie K is stunned and then begins to sob.)

BABUSHKA

Brute. You'll get yours.

FRANKIE K

How could you hurt me like that!

KAFKA

You have your fifty cents. Let it be a lesson.

FRANKIE K

I hate you. I hate you more than I ever hated school and I hated every minute I was in it. Here's your ugly fifty cents back.

(He throws the coins at Kafka's feet.)

KAFKA

I only want to help you...

FRANKIE K

Where is it? Mama, where's your left arm? Forgive me, Mama...

(Frankie K is busy picking up photograph bits.)

KAFKA

You can't survive and stay innocent.

FRANKIE K

I hope never to see you and your desk again!

(Frankie K exits. But then he has to return, because he has forgotten his box. He grabs the box and exits without looking at Kafka.)

KAFKA

The offered hand is always felt as a slap.

(Kafka looks at his stage surroundings.

A bell rings and voices are heard down the hall. A knock on the bedroom door. Frankie K and Löwry enter from the wings and look at Kafka.)

A FEMALE VOICE (MRS. KLUG)

May I come in, Franz?

(Mrs. Klug enters his bedroom. Kafka tries to shut and hide all his notebooks and hide the holes in his socks. Mrs. Lug does not acknowledge Frankie K or Löwy.)

MRS. KLUG

Your family said I could enter. Although they did give me strange looks.

FRANKIE K

Why doesn't he say anything?

LÖWY

She's the first woman to enter your sanctity?

FRANKIE K

Hey, Mister, what happens next in the play? Do I get hired? Do I marry Mary Anne?

MRS. KLUG

You're giving me a strange look too. I'm sorry. Should I go?

FRANKIE K

I'd like to meet the President.

LÖWY

Quiet, you.

MRS. KLUG

Lowy and I are no longer...keeping company together. Did he tell you? We had a fight about the theater. I said I was an artist who believe in love and he said I was an emotional bully who made everything about her. A difference of opinion. I said I would ask you.

KAFKA

Ask me...?

MRS. KLUG

Is it possible to make love? Can one artist make love to another artist, or can an artist only make art and love be damned? Have you ever made love to another artist, Franz?

(An embarrassing stage silence.)

I've insulted you in some way, I'll go...

LÖWY

Speak, you lumpkin.

FRANKIE K

What's going on...?

KAFKA

He's wrong about you.

MRS. KLUG

How is he wrong?

KAFKA

He should beg you to stay in his company. Your soft voice, outspread fingers on the breast, holding yourself erect when you meet your antagonist - these are the traits I find most winning in an actress.

MRS. KLUG

I'm terrible.

KAFKA

Not at all! It's the roles that are bad, not you.

MRS. KLUG

With the right material, do you think it's possible I could become a great actress?

KAFKA

There is something great about you.

LÖWY

No doubt.

FRANKIE K

Quiet, you.

MRS. KLUG

I always knew I was born for the stage. For what reason were you born, Franz Kafka?

KAFKA

To help the injured collect on their insurance claims.

MRS. KLUG

Haven't I been injured by you and your friend? Haven't I? I know what the two of you really think I'm good for. When you see me on the stage, all you want to do is make me your whore. Just like him. Like every man,

KAFKA

Me? What? No. I? You?

MRS. KLUG

Don't talk bad of me. I'm not taking your friend away from you.

KAFKA

I? I don't...

MRS. KLUG

Is he going to leave me? I can say nothing. Demand nothing. I, who offer him everything, who love him more than I love the theater, I have no rights.

KAFKA

You have rights...

FRANKIE K

Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

LÖWY

Quiet, you.

MRS. KLUG

What rights do I have?

FRANKIE K

Free speech.

LÖWY

Shh, you.

MRS. KLUG

There are no rights when two are madly in love as we are. You lose your rights, your sleep, your sanity - everything.

KAFKA / LÖWY

It's we who lose everything!

MRS. KLUG

We?

KAFKA

You are the ones with all the power...

MRS. KLUG

Is that so? And where do we keep all this power? In our powderpuff?

(She takes out a theatrically oversized powderpuff and tortures Kafka's stone face with it. He freezes. Frankie K exits with his box.)

FRANKIE K

What's happening...

MRS. KLUG

We're very much alike, you and I. We both have no hope in winning, but we fight for our right to lose.

KAFKA

It's not fair to tease me - I don't know how to...

MRS. KLUG

Have you ever been in love, Franz?

(Kafka is still. Mrs. Klug grabs her things and walks to the door.)

LÖWY

She's wonderful, you schmo. Say so. How did I ever let her go?

MRS. KLUG

The thing in life to be is a sincere actress and a determined woman. I'm neither. I came to say good-bye. I'm giving up on...the stage.

KAFKA

The stage needs you. We...I...does Löwy know?

MRS. KLUG

He knows I'm a vain actress and a bruised woman. And I have to find a way to rescue myself before the curtain falls.

(She gives Kafka a very full meaningful good-bye kiss. She exits.
Löwy stares in disbelief, disappointment, and empathy.)

LÖWY

Franz! What is happening heere? Mrs. Klug, we need you to take your place. We're ready to do the next scene in *Die Amerikanerin* and I need you...to play my wife Betty. No one else will do. Franz, into the audience with you.

(Löwy and Mrs. Klug become Bobo and Betty Rose, an elderly couple, who wish to have their picture taking in front of the sign: *New Deal Traveling Theatre of Omahaw*.
Frankie offers to help them and takes their picture.)

LÖWY /BOBO

We're the Roses, Beauregard and Betty, but everyone calls me Bobo, Beauregard is too precious for me, if you know what I mean. It doesn't sound Amerikanerin. You're new, aren't ya? Just off the boat? You look strong, you'll do well, welcome to the country.

MRS. KLUG/BETTY

That's Bo, your welcome wagon all in one.

(Kafka takes his seat in the audience.)

BOBO

Want your picture taken? Have you had your picture taken since you got here? That's one of the ways you know you've arrived. Here, I'll take a picture of you and the Misses and she'll send it on to you.

BETTY

(To Frankie K:) He feels just like one of my own. We have ten grandchildren.

BOBO

All born here in the U.S. of A., living in ten different states.

FRANKIE K

You must be proud.

BETTY

We never see them. They're so busy. We get cards.

FRANKIE K

That's nice.

BETTY

Now and then. They're all so happy busy, busy happy. College graduates. Married.

BOBO

Except one. There's always one.

BETTY

He wants to be an actor. For the Yiddish Theatre, of all things.

BOBO

Quiet, Betty.

BETTY

You're to blame.

BOBO

His first word as a baby was in Yiddish. Can you believe it? She blames me. But I never spoke it to the grandkids, after all they were Amerikanerins, not Eastern European schmucks and schlemiels. It wasn't me. But I'll tell you what I think.

BETTY

Bobo.

BOBO

A dybbuk got into that kid. Some Yiddish actor who won't let go.

BETTY

There are no dybbuks in the U.S. of A. I told you not to talk like that.

BOBO

You told me, you told me, but that doesn't make the dybbuk go away.

BETTY

Don't make me tell you again.

BOBO

Don't start on me. We're having a happy vacation, aren't we?

BETTY

Itzhak just needs to find himself.

KAFKA

Itzhak?

(Bobo gives Kafka a severe look, but stays in scene.)

BOBO

His name's Jerry, but he insists he be called Itzhak.

BETTY

He's a wonderful painter. He paints backgrounds.

BOBO

For those fancy-schmancy arty plays that no one understands.

BETTY

Not arty, avant-gardey.

BOBO

Just once I'd like to see him paint a pretty girl on a billboard with big breasts and big teeth. Would that be such a bad thing? Take another picture of me and my gal by the sign, would ya?

BETTY

My gal? I'm a grandma.

BOBO

You're still my gal, aren't ya?

FRANKIE

Do you ever want to go back?

BETTY

Go back where, dear?

BOBO

Go back? To the old country? They don't have no New Deal of Omahaw over there. Just some old paintings and a lot of graves.

BETTY

We love it here. Amerikaka is the Promised Land.

(Frankie K takes their picture.)

BOBO

Thank you kindly. Next time we drive through this way, I bet you'll be running the place.

BETTY

Look out for our Itzee. He might take a look at the postcard and come out this way. Amerikaka is such a beautiful big place and he's only seen New York's lower East Side! Here, let me pinch your cheeks. Like one of my own.

FRANKIE K

I wish you could adopt me.

BETTY

Bye bye. Meet a nice girl and get married. The Promised Land is no place to be all alone. I hope you get the job.

(Löwy pulls back the curtain to reveal a painted drop of women standing on ladders with long white robes hiding the rungs wearing gold angel wings and blowing thin golden horns. There is one real ladder and Mary Anne, dressed as an angel, is poised on it, and blows her horn.)

FRANKIE K

Look at all the pretty girls. They're angels. How nice. I like it here.

KAFKA

Because there is no such place as AmeriKaka. None of this, it doesn't exist...

LÖWY/FRANKIE K

Shhh...

(A bell rings. Mary Anne goes on break, she waves to Frankie K.)

MARY ANNE

Franklin! Up here! Stay right there.

(She gathers up her angel gown, throws it over her shoulder and climbs down her ladder.)

FRANKIE K

Mary Anne! It is you!

MARY ANNE

Yes, it is. I thought it was you too. I quit the sewing factory and came out to Omaha after we spoke. The posters made it all seem so glamorous. I'm so happy you did as well. I hated thinking of you remaining unemployed when you could come here and be valued for whatever it is you can do.

FRANKIE K

Do you really think they'll hire me? How many performances do you do a day?

MARY ANNE

Five. Four as an angel. And one as a lamb that's gone astray. Meals provided. They're the only ones hiring. You better get in while you can.

FRANKIE K

What's the message?

MARY ANNE

Message? I stand on a ladder and blow a trumpet. If there's a message, you got me.

FRANKIE K

There's always a message. Or moral. Or theme.

MARY ANNE

We're just the angels. We don't have to worry about such things. Can you tumble? I think they're looking for Chinese acrobats.

FRANKIE K

I'm not Chinese.

MARY ANNE

I'm not an angel, but they gave me wings, put me on a ladder, and here I am. Can you stand on your hands?

FRANKIE K

Sure. With practice. Once I've been properly trained.

MARY ANNE

I'm sure they'll know what it is you should do. Don't worry. You're perfect. For whatever it is. After your interview, come back and tell me what block schedule they give you. I'm a B. If they give you a D, I'll never see you again. Everything is perfectly timed. You eat, sleep, work and recreate completely on schedule. I never thought show business could be such a well-ordered thing.

FRANKIE K

I read Abraham Lincoln got shot while watching a play.

MARY ANNE

Hush. Why would you mention that? They might be sensitive about such things. Everyone's still waiting for the new President to say he'll cut the red ribbon at the premiere.

FRANKIE K

The President. Wow. That'd be great. This is exactly where I've always wanted to be.

KAFKA/MARY ANNE

Why are you crying?

FRANKIE K

I don't know. It's hurting my heart to be so close to my dreams. If they don't take me on, I don't know what I'll do.

MARY ANNE

Of course, they will. I haven't known them to turn down anyone.

FRANKIE K

I'm sure in an organization like this they'll be looking for someone who's got something on the ball, who's ready to work hard in order to get promoted. They like to see the sweat on your brow, the cut of your suit, the piss in your bladder. That's just fine by me. I can blowhard faster than any black bastard they've ever seen.

MARY ANNE

I'm not sure I follow...

FRANKIE K

Kafkania slang I learned on the intersection. It gives me street credibility.

MARY ANNE

Break's over...you'd better get in line for your interview. I've another angel trumpet round to do.

FRANKIE K

For who? There's no audience.

MARY ANNE

Yes, there is. The ideal one. You'll catch on. It's all explained once they hire you.

FRANKIE K

I hope I get a trumpet and get to be an angel too.

MARY ANNE

Only girls get hired to be angels.

FRANKIE K

(He stares at Kafka.) Who says?

MARY ANNE

You're funny. You're very selective about what you notice and say, maybe that's why I took a liking to you right away. He's off in his own world, I said, but somehow he's noticed me. Even angels like it when a little attention's paid.

FRANKIE K

Of course, I noticed you. You're the only angel I saw who's a Jew.

MARY ANNE

Oh. I'm a Christian. Irish Catholic.

FRANKIE K

I'm a Chinese acrobat.

MARY ANNE

Whatever we are, we're Amerikanerins. And that's the best thing to be in this day and age. Why haven't you kissed me? For good luck, for your interview.

FRANKIE K

You gotta make your own luck in Amerikaka, don't you know? That's the way to get on the worm.

MARY ANNE

Ope, that's my cue. Come back and tell me what happens at your interview. And you needn't mention being Chinese or a Jew, even though it won't matter if you do. Because here, we're all Amerikanerins.

(She starts up her ladder.)

FRANKIE K

Or Negroes.

MARY ANNE

Try not to say too much in the interview, will you? Especially your Kaka slang. I'll be so sad if you talk your way out of a for sure thing. You should have kissed me...ope, I really better not miss my cue.

(She blows him a kiss and climbs her ladder and is gone. Trumpets blow.)

FRANKIE K

Mention what? That I'm too shy to kiss you? That I want to be an angel?

(Frankie K looks to Löwy and Kafka in the audience.)

Um, what's next? Where do I go?

LÖWY

Ask the sensitive perfectionist, maybe he'll write us another chapter -

(The drop rises to reveal Kafka's desk and window.)

KAFKA

What? Who among us can rescue anyone? That sentiment is for the stage.

(Löwy exits into the wings. Yip and Yap enter and begin to transform the stage with barbed wire suggesting a German concentration camp. Babushka can be seen mopping.)

What's happening?

YIP

Scene change.

KAFKA

This can't be right...

YAP

Orders are orders.

KAFKA

You've obviously been given the wrong orders.

YAP

Orders are...

KAFKA

Show me your orders. An official document. Show me a form.

(Yip and Yap look at each other, they have no form, and are worried they may have misunderstood their orders.)

KAFKA

I thought not.

(They exit. Kafka realizes he is alone in his room.)

4 a.m. It's always 4 a.m. here in my Utopian Kafkaia. When the rest of the world is asleep, I can have my great escape...

(Kafka coughs.)

(Löwy enters on a ladder as an Über Angel. He is also a version of the Statue of Liberty.)

LÖWY

Live alone or die embraced
Keep or lose your faith
Dance the dance
Show your face
Sin your hardest
Wipe clean the slate
Good or bad - neither rate

There is no Eden
There is no snake
There is no escape

KAFKA

Ev'ry birth is a new mistake
Ev'ry death a new found grace
Ev'ry birth is a new mistake
Ev'ry death is a new found grace
Live alone or die embraced
Hurry up, don't be late

FRANKIE K

Escape!
Escape!
Escape!

(Frankie K reaches for the pulley. The New Deal drop rises. Yip and Yap pull Löwy off the ladder and strip him to reveal he is wearing concentration camp pajamas under his costume.)

KAFKA

Can we please not have to keep changing the scene?

(They ignore him.)

Can we please not have to keep changing the scene?

(Babushka holds out a newspaper from the crack in the curtain. Kafka takes the paper.)

MARY ANNE

Ring around the rosey

KAFKA

1939? Germany marches into Poland...?

MARY ANNE

Pockets full of posey

BABUSHKA

1939. You've leapt past your grave, Mr. Kafka...

KAFKA

My grave? When did I die...?

MARY ANNE

Ashes ashes
We all fall down!

KAFKA

(Reads)...what is the Jewish solution?

Did no one escape?

BABUSHKA

Felice escaped. After you died she married a shopkeeper.

MARY ANNE

(overlap:) Ring around the rosey, pockets full of posey

BABUSHKA

He took her to Amerika.

KAFKA

And Löwy?

BABUSKA

Löwy was pulled off the stage and taken to the camps -

MARY ANNE

Ring around the rosey , pockets full of posey

BABUSHKA

- where he performed the stories of Shalom Aleichem -

MARY ANNE

Ring around the rosey, pockets full of posey

BABUSHKA

- for all the Western Jews who never once paid to see him when they were free.

KAFKA

And you? And my three little sisters...?

MARY ANNE

Ashes ashes

KAFKA

They took my sisters? Why? What did we do?

EVERYONE

We're all born Jews!

(Everyone claps, laughs and runs off stage.)

KAFKA

Come back....

(Frankie K enters from behind the red curtain.)

FRANKIE K

Excuse me, I'm trying to play my part in *Die Amerikanerin* but someone keeps changing the play. It's getting me mad. So stop it, whoever's responsible. I mean it.

Excuse me, do you know where I go for my interview?

(The Babushka hands him her mop and exits. The New Deal drop lifts. The camp wire is still present. Frankie K shakes his mop at the raising drop. He looks out at Kafka in the audience.)

FRANKIE K

Do you know who's in charge? Who can understand the 20th Century!

(Frankie K exits. Yip and Yap enter and change the scenery.)

KAFKA

Can we please not have to keep changing the scene?

(They ignore him.)

Can we please not have to keep changing the scene?

(Yip and Yap look at Kafka. They look at each other. Yap hands him their orders. They finish and exit. The stage has been transformed into the barbed wire of a German concentration camp. A cold wind blows in through the bedroom window. Outside it stands a Nazi camp guard – played by Yap. Löwy enters in his prison camp pajamas.)

NAZI

(As he sneezes.) Ah-Ah-Ashkenazim.

LÖWY

Gesundheit.

(They turn their heads and look at each other in a take. They stare out front.
The guard exits.)

KAFKA

Löwy?

LÖWY

Franz. It's you? How is it you're here? You died years before the war. Have you become a Wandering Jew?

KAFKA

I'm dead? I died?

LÖWY

You escaped this evil. Why be witness now? Are you still angry at the world?

KAFKA

I want to be with you.

LÖWY

Yes, I'm about to achieve my greatest stage triumph yet. These Nazi murderers want a chance to laugh at the payatz.

KAFKA

Murderers? Itzhak, let's go...

LÖWY

But I have switched the play. In this play I cast out evil from the bride. A dybbuk has entered her and will not free her. You know what a dybbuk is? Of course you don't, you German Jew. Listen close: there are many times we leave our earthly bodies. Death is one of those times. But sometimes when we die, our souls cannot be reconciled with leaving this world – work undone, love unanswered, wrongs that must be made right – the hungry soul, angry, full of desire, returns as a dybbuk and fights the most powerful obstacles - death, the laws of the Universe, God Himself - to mend the great tear in the fabric and make the cloth whole again. But at a cost: a dybbuk's pride burns its soul away and causes great harm to itself and the innocent.

KAFKA

I want to be near you, Itzhak, but I don't always understand you...

LÖWY

We also call this play *Between Two Worlds*. The dead student returns as a dybbuk and takes hold of a girl who was promised to him as his bride. The daughter of Jerusalem suffers. I play the rabbi who must heal them both. He's weak and old, but strong of heart. It's a great part. One I waited my whole life to play. Hush. Here they come. Hide under the cloth.

(Unseen Nazi soldiers enter. A frail thin woman who plays the possessed Leya in *The Dybbuk* enters. It is Mrs. Klug. Löwy half carries her to her place on the stage. She closes her eyes.

Löwy turns to go upstage and trips. Sound of Nazi laughter. Löwy turns his Rabbi character's eyes on the audience, and the laughter is immediately silenced. He waves his hands, and the stage is a synagogue. The Nazi noise rumbles. Löwy glowers.)

LÖWY/RABBI

Sit. Break the silence at peril to your soul's everlasting life. I begin. The world of God is great and holy. There are in the world seventy tongues. The holiest of these is the holy tongue of Israel. The holiest of all things written in this tongue is the Holy Torah; of all the Torah the holiest part is the Ten Commandments, and the holiest of all the words in the Ten Commandments is the Name of the Lord...

The human soul is drawn by pain and grief to the source of its being, He above.

(During the incantation the stomping of boots on wooden bleachers gets louder and louder until the wall of sound silences. The frail woman rises.)

I am playing the rabbi. You are playing Leya. You have seen great evil, but I know the words that will cure you.

(She whispers. No one can hear her. Löwy approaches her and she whispers her words to him. He speaks them to the audience, since she cannot.)

LÖWY/RABBI

They keep us here behind a fence...
Wire and chain embrace our faith...
Embraced by day, embraced by night...
I cannot crawl through the links...
I sit on the hard winter ground...
In the cold, in the dark, I wait...
When dawn smiles, I smile back...
The sun arrives my spirit escapes.

(Löwy holds her.)

Dybbuk, why do you do evil upon the daughter of Israel? I command you, leave the body of this innocent girl. They say a dead soul may not stay in the realm of the living. Is this girl dead? Am I? Dybbuk, tell me your name.

DYBBUK'S VOICE (KAFKA)

I will not. It is not I who harm her. She is like one of my sisters to me. She is the bride that was promised to me in eternity. Do not send me away from here. I have nowhere to go.

LÖWY/RABBI

On every side, the forces of evil lie in wait to seize her, you and me. The world of God is great and holy. I am filled with pity for all who have lost their way.

(Kafka stands and reveals himself.)

DYBBUK (KAFKA)

There is heaven, and there is earth, and all the countless worlds outside and within -

KAFKA

- yet in not one of these is there any place for me.

LÖWY/RABBI

None have a place when all are far from God.

(A rumbling is heard as the phantom audience pounds on the bleachers with their boots.)

I command you evil shadows into the deep of the abyss where neither light or imagination may free you again. In the name and with the power of a holy community of Jews, I, Azrael, son of Itzele, order you to depart out of the body of the maiden, Leya, daughter of Channah, and in departing, to do no injury either to her or to any other living being. Evil can never triumph over time.

(The pounding stops. Clicks of rifles are heard.)

LÖWY

Sinful and obstinate spirits, do not try to shout me down. With the power of Almighty God and with the sanction of the Holy Scriptures I rend asunder all that ties you to this living world and to the daughters of Jerusalem. I command you - submit! Submit! Do you submit?

(A gunshot rings out. Löwy grabs his heart, but realizes the shot missed.)

Ha, you missed, you schmuck.

(Shots ring out. A red curtain falls and we do not see Löwy or the final death.)

(After a few moments, a very distraught Kafka steps out from behind the curtain.)

KAFKA

I wasn't prepared to give any introductory remarks... I...I...I've had to step in and...I...I asked you to the Yiddish Theatre, because... it could offer a remedy to our sickness, dream our escape...

(A man-sized beetle crawls out from under the curtain. It runs into the front of the audience house. Someone tries to beat it off with their feet. It becomes frightened. It scurries back under the curtain.)

I do apologize...

(Kafka walks up on the stage and stares out the window. The violin plays.
Frankie K enters.)

FRANKIE K

Do you know who's in charge?

KAFKA

I'M NOT THE GUILTY ONE!

(Kafka stares out at the night's nothingness.

Frankie K picks up the mop and gets to work. He mops the stage area that is between the window and the audience, so he too is now outside Kafka's room. Mary Anne enters, back in her angel gown, which is now rolled up and in her hands so she can walk.)

MARY ANNE

Didn't you hear the whistle? That means we go on break. You can't work when you're supposed to be on break. It's the law. Do you like apples?

(She hands Frankie K an apple and takes one out for herself.)

FRANKIE K

Thank you. What are we suppose to do on break?

MARY ANNE

Nothing, silly.

(They bite into their apples. They both stare out at the vast nothingness of the midwest as Kafka stares out the window at the night's nothingness.)

FRANKIE K

It seems so vast.

MARY ANNE

Nebraska? Yes, it is.

FRANKIE K

What else is out there?

MARY ANNE

(She sings:)

Oklahoma.
Kansas.
Wisconsin.
Ohio.
Indiana.
Iowa.

FRANKIE K

Wow. They sound so...exotic. Strange and magical in the most silent ways.

MARY ANNE

Don't get lost. I've heard that just by thinking about how flat the midwest is, some people have simply vanished, never to return.

FRANKIE K

Is that a bad thing?

MARY ANNE

You wouldn't want to vanish, would you?

FRANKIE K

I'd rather vanish than end.

MARY ANNE

I'd rather be somebody's sweetheart.

FRANKIE K

Everyone here seems pleased to be part of the big theatre scheme and everything, but I still feel odd, as if I don't belong.

MARY ANNE

Don't you want to be someone's sweetheart?

FRANKIE K

I'm not happy being part of a big scheme. I like a lot about the New Deal, don't get me wrong. I like the order. Everything in its place. Everything part of the whole. Nothing out of place.

MARY ANNE

Doesn't that make you feel lonely?

FRANKIE K

Everything being in its place? You're right, Mary Anne, because I never am in the right place at the right time. That's very astute of you.

MARY ANNE

We're not talking about the same things.

FRANKIE K

We're not?

(The whistle blows.)

MARY ANNE

Franklin, help me with my wings, would you? Is my halo on right? I have to remind myself, I signed on for a career, not a romance.

(She kisses him.)

That's for when you leave. I have a feeling you'll vanish before we get the chance. Bye, Frankie K. Stay sweet.

(She ascends her ladder and is gone. Frankie K picks up his mop.)

FRANKIE K

Romance?

(He sings:) Nebraska. Oklahoma. Kansas. Wisconsin. Ohio. Indiana. Iowa...

Utopia...

KAFKA

You're one of the fortunate ones. You get to stay innocent.

(Frankie K throws down his mop.)

FRANKIE K

I'm going out West - the Wild West. Where sky and land never meet and never end. The Great Lady of the Sword is out there. She's opened a kick-ass saloon in San Francisco. I'm going out to put my elbows on the bar.

KAFKA

That's a dream, not a destiny.

FRANKIE K

Yippie Oy Vey. That's the future calling. It belongs to all of us.

KAFKA

Apart from our fear of it, yes.

FRANKIE K

Come West with me.

KAFKA

Tear myself away from everything I am? You've no idea what going West means.

FRANKIE K

Why does it have to mean anything? Huh, Mister? Why does it have to mean anything? Once we get here, won't it mean whatever we make it mean?

KAFKA

We? I'm not going anywhere, how could I...?

(The Babushka enters from the wings and picks up the mop.)

BABUSHKA

Leave your room for the Holy Land.

FRANKIE K

Where sky and land never meet and never end.

BABUSHKA

Make a leap, Mr. Kafka.

FRANKIE K

You're a funny strange man.

BABUSHKA

Be a Jew.

FRANKIE K

Be a cowboy too!

FRANKIE K/BABUSHKA

Kiss kiss kiss!

KAFKA

Why stop to kiss when you face the abyss?

FRANKIE K/BABUSHKA

Kiss kiss kiss!

KAFKA

Burn everything I've written after I die!

FRANKIE K

You better be joking! Mister? Kiss, kiss, kiss? I have to go.

KAFKA

Go? But it's I who am leaving you...

FRANKIE K

Did you like our play?

KAFKA

No. In fact I hated the whole thing, the past, the future, what a nightmare, the whole 20th Century.

FRANKIE K

Oh, no. It's all my fault. I failed everyone

(Frankie K is devastated.)

KAKFA

No, no, no, no, no. I loved you.

(Frankie K is overcome with emotion and hugs Kafka.)

KAFKA

Why is it I want to cry in front of you like a little boy?

FRANKIE K

It's time to say good-bye, that's why. No time like the present.

KAFKA

But. Shouldn't you stay until the end....?

FRANKIE K

I don't believe in ends. Gotta go, don'cha know? Men here don't kiss in the old European way.

FRANKIE K

They shake hands.

(He offers hand.)

It's not the same.

(He kisses Kafka good-bye.)

KAFKA

I've never been kissed by a cowboy.

FRANKIE K

Out West they have a New Deal Make it Real Traveling Aeroplane Show. I'm signing up to be a cowboy pilot. Once I'm trained, Mary Anne can come out and do handstands on the wings.

(Kafka embraces Frankie K.)

KAFKA

Luftmentsh.

FRANKIE K

Look for me in the clouds. Mister, you have to let go of me now. Crack a smile, crocodile. See you later, alligator. Gotta go, don't you know. Freedom - here I come!

(Frankie K breaks free of Kafka's embrace and exits up and out the window.)

KAFKA

Freedom is a disaster waiting to happen.

(Kafka is alone in his room.)

Löwy, *die Amerikanerin* is running away! Do I let him go? Where are you? I want to laugh with you one more time before I...

(A coughing fit. He spits and sings:)

I played my parrrt.
You spooned a tart.
You freed my soul
Why break my heart?

WHO'S THE GUILTY ONE?

(He suddenly sees that Frankie K has left his box behind.)

KAFKA

Franklin, you forgot your box...! He won't survive a day without...Amerikaka, here I come!

(Kafka grabs the box and runs to soar out the window but crashes downwards and falls through the window. As in the beginning of the play, foghorns, boat bells and gulls are heard. Seagulls fly up to the window and are gone.

A speck is seen. It grows larger. As it looms closer it is seen to be the Statue of Liberty. Wagnerian music overwhelms. Liberty breaks through the frame of the window, a grim determined look on her face, and in her upraised arm she holds a gleaming sword. She cries out and disappears.

Kafka's three sisters –played by Mary Anne (Ellie), Frankie K (Valli) and Mrs. Klug (Ottla), row onstage in a lifeboat. Ghost-white, ashen-faced, they row into New York City's harbor at daybreak.)

ELLI

I think we're here.

(They stop rowing as the New York City skyline appears.)

OTTLA

O Amerika
Land that I love
Jerusalem
And Babylon
Alexandria
And Gilead
Garden of Eden
Baghdad by the Bay
New York, New York
Utopia

Where is she? Where's the great lady? I don't see her.

VALLI

We must be lost. Are we lost?

ELLI

This is New York City, I'm sure of it.

OTTLA

Where is she?

VALLI

We must be dead. Are we dead?

ELLI

Keep rowing.

OTTLA

Everyone said a Great Lady would welcome us.

VALLI

We must have misunderstood. Are we a ship of fools?

ELLI

God keep us strong. Keep rowing.

OTTLA

We rowed forty days and forty nights. I so looked forward to meeting her, kissing the ground and kissing her hem. Hearing her sing of the brave and the free from sea to shining sea.

ELLI

She's a statue of Liberty, not a music hall queen. Row.

OTTLA

Where is she?

ELLI

She's got the day off. Or maybe she's on strike. Row.

OTTLA

(calling:) Great Lady. Great Lady. Where are you?

(Her calling is met by the cry of gulls. Elli has a hissy fit.)

ELLI

What is wrong with you! You know we're crossing over to the natural world illegally. You want us caught and deported! Now shut up and sit down.

OTTLA

I'm sorry. You don't have to yell at me.

VALLI

Maybe we escaped. Did we escape?

ELLI

I dreamt the two of you got free.

VALLI

I dreamt the two of you jumped the fence and got free.

OTTLA

I dreamt the two of you lived into a very ripe old age.

ELLI

Imagine that - us three, old biddies.

Three old biddies, three.

Nyeh nyeh nyeh nyeh nyeh.

ALL

Nyeh nyeh nyeh nyeh nyeh!

Nyeh nyeh nyeh nyeh

Three little biddies three.

ELLI

Three old witchies three.

OTTLA

THREE AVENGING FURIES THREE!

(They are quiet amidst the sound of water, foghorns and gulls.)

ELLI

I dreamt the two of you managed to get free.

VALLI

I dreamt the two of you jumped the fence and got free.

OTTLA

I dreamt the Great Lady was here to welcome us three.

(A scrim lights up. Behind it is a crowd - are they cut-outs? puppets?

They feel like a swarming mob however they are created.)

CROWD

Kaka! Kaka! Kaka!

OTTLA

Listen? Do you hear?

CROWD

KAKA! KAKA! KAKA!

(OttlA begins to wave towards the shore.)

ELLI

Sit down.

VALLI

God help us, a mob.

OTTLA

Don't you understand what they're shouting? They're shouting welcome!

CROWD

KAKA! KAKA! KAKA!

ELLI

Not to us.

VALLI

Will they catch us and send us back?

OTTLA

The Great Lady said she take us in.

CROWD

NO TO REFUGEES.

NO TO REFUGEES.

OTTLA

Look, there she is. Up there, a vagabond in the stars. Blondzhende shtern.

(Her finger traces out the Statue of Liberty in a constellation.)

REPRISE: O AMERIKA (PROMISED LANDS)

OTTLA

O Amerika
Land that I love
Jerusalem
And Babylon
Alexandria
And Gilead
Garden of Eden
Baghdad by the Bay
New York, New York
Utopia

Great Lady, I put my faith in you, guide us as you will.

(Kafka dogpaddles into the waters, using Frankie K's box as a floating device.)

ELLI/VALLI

Franz!

KAFKA

It's just as I thought. A limbo of unfulfilled prophecies...

ELLI

Hush.

VALLI

Look up.

VOICE OF LIBERTY

If you find my beloved, will you not tell him
that I am faint with love?

OTTLA

There she is – your bride. Don't you see?

(The sisters row or float out of view.)

VOICE OF LIBERTY

His whispers are sweetness itself
Such is my beloved, such is my darling,
O daughters of Jerusalem.

(The waters turn a black-red. Liberty enters as an angel and takes the exhausted Kafka in her arms. Calm. Liberty is masked and her voice is disembodied.)

KAFKA

I've been fasting to achieve a pure state. I fast from Sabbath to Sabbath.

LIBERTY'S VOICE

Isn't that a little extreme?

KAFKA

I, unlike true extremists such as yourself, do not put my trust in God.

LIBERTY'S VOICE

Would you judge God?

KAFKA

The critics say He too was better at writing beginnings than ends...are you my end? Or a cruel joke sent to torment me?

(He laughs, then spits up blood.
Liberty takes a white handkerchief and wipes his brow and mouth.)

LIBERTY'S VOICE

He took me into the wine-garden
Gave me loving glances.
He refreshed me with raisins, he loved me with apricots;

(She unmaskes herself or disappears and in her place, perhaps wearing the crown and holding the sword, is Löwy. (*Note: it was Felice's voice which spoke the lines.*))

LÖWY

What's the matter? Not happy to see me?

(Kafka wraps himself in the white curtain and climbs on his desk. Löwy holds him as he trembles.)

Did you like our play?

KAFKA

I do like theatre best when it doesn't try so hard to be happy. Who really enjoys a happy play? We go to the theatre hoping for a catastrophe. The stage walls about to collapse, the frightened actor in the back looking us in the eye, the virgin girl baring her rosy knees, the villain losing his wig with a sneeze -

LÖWY

And just when salvation should arrive, the red curtain sticks. Everyone stuck on the stage without an exit or a prayer -

KAFKA

...like flies on sticky paper.

LÖWY

There's nothing more human than passionate failure.

KAFKA

Terror and chaos held off by the sheer will of the actors. What heroes...

LÖWY

What children...

KAFKA

What monsters of original sin!

LÖWY

They say the theatre is dead, don't believe them. Many a time I've seen a play die right in front of me and then as easy as a sneeze come back to life. What are you, Franz Kafka? You suffer and keep silent and are strong. Who knew my non-believing friend would become the prophet of the faithless world? Are you ready to go now?

KAFKA

Go where? There's still too much to do here in my room...there's still so much in front of me.

LÖWY

Ah hah.

KAFKA

Itzhak...

LÖWY

Yes, Franz?

KAFKA

The theatre is the only place where one can enter Jerusalem.

(Löwy kisses him. Kafka spits up blood. He dies. A great man-sized beetle rushes out from under the desk and scurries up an angel ladder and is gone. Mary Anne blows her trumpet from far off. Frankie K from beyond the window blows taps. The Yiddish acting company comes on stage and strikes the set, which includes Kafka. They are gone. Löwy picks up Liberty's sword.)

LÖWY

Is it possible God didn't realize until too late we human actors were woefully out of our realm playing high tragedy? One look at the muck we made out of His hopes for a Divine Comedy and He decided to wash His hands of us and make a savvy exit. Then when we finally exhausted ourselves and looked for Him, lo, and behold, God is gone. What to do? Hang our heads, like the glum, mucky, tattered, doomed orphans we are? Or carry on and improvise, like unsuspecting clowns who tumble from the womb, rough and ready, smiles and tears painted on? Ho, ho. Lo and behold; God might return, because it is in the theatre after all where the shmutz in life can be made sublime!

Where's that fool of a maintenance engineer? Pupick, get in here. Do your job, so we can all go home.

(Frankie K enters dragging in the ghost light absentmindedly singing a ditty which has a happy tune while also carrying a Coney Island hot dog.)

FRANKIE K
In every land, in every place
Adam and Eve have had to face
A life of exile and despair
Homeless strangers everywhere

(Löwy gives him a look.)

It's kosher. I asked.

(Löwy takes a bite of the hot dog and exits. Frankie K stares out at the audience.
Kafka's voice enters from the audience.)

KAFKA
I thought you were going out West?

FRANKIE K
I am.

(Kafka returns to the stage.)

KAFKA
I admire your optimism. I don't share in it, but I admire it. Go, I grant you the freedom to be
your own creation. So go. What's wrong?

FRANKIE K
I don't know... I'm afraid.

KAFKA
Come here, pupick. My love, my love, my good one. Nothing bad can happen to you.

(Kafka swings his arm around Frankie K's shoulder. The *luftmentsh* is seen and plays his
violin. They listen. The music pauses.)

Shall we?

FRANKIE K
Let's go.

(They go.

The luftmentsh plays a wild and celebratory violin aria.

The ghost light remains.

End of play.)

GLOSSARY (*Yiddish words/expressions are in italics*)

Yiddish - (which births Yinglish, Ameridish, etc.) Yiddish and Hebrew are two separate languages, though Yiddish will use Hebrew. Hebrew is the holy language, language of the Torah, study, prayer, etc. Yiddish is the *mama-loshen*, or mother tongue, because it's what was spoken at home by the mothers, women, who were not schooled in Hebrew. It is also called a jargon and bastard language by some and was looked down upon by some, German-speaking Jews in America for example, when a poorer class of Eastern European Jews came to America speaking it. Yiddish is also not a synonym for Jewish, but is commonly used that way. Since Jews were separated out in society, lived in ghettos, Yiddish developed among them - a mix of High German, Old German, Old French, Old Italian, Hebrew, local dialects, etc. After the 15th century, it really flowered in Eastern Europe when Jews went to Poland, Galicia, Hungary, Russia, Romania. Hebrew is the official language of Israel (and Yiddish had been looked down upon for a while in Israel.)

Ah hah - a note of sudden comprehension, pleasure, triumph

Alexandria - used for its status as a mythical city of a great age and learning

Amerika - the title Max Brod gave Kafka's chapters of an unfinished book, which Kafka had called *The Man Who Vanishes*, about a young man Karl Rossman, who is sent to America. From 1880-1910, about one third of Eastern European Jews migrated, 90 percent to America. Kafka began the book around 1910-12, and was influenced by Charles Dickens around this time (Dickens had written a book set in America as well entitled *Martin Chuzzlewit*.)

die Amerikanerin - the American : there was a Yiddish play by this name by Hymen Myself

Ashkenazim - Jews who live in or moved to Northern France and Germanic cities and central and Eastern Europe who had emigrated long before from Babylon and Palestine. They speak Yiddish. Shephardic Jews come from Spain, Portugal and southern France and speak Ladino. Known as peddlers, peasants, proletariats, fundamentalists, steeped in poverty and superstition; they resisted the secular world, resigned themselves to the humiliations and brutality of the world.

babushka - a scarf women wear around their heads, associated with Eastern European women, especially grandmothers. Became nickname for such older women.

Babylon - where Jews came from. Mythical resonance of a great age.

Baghdad by the Bay - nickname for San Francisco, both Baghdad and San Francisco are used for their mythical status as meccas, cultural havens, utopias

blonzhende stern - vagabond stars, also title of book about the Yiddish Theatre and title of a comic novel by Shalom Aleichem

bubbeleh - term of endearment, dear child, honey - big male baby for our play Catskills - where Jewish stand-ups go for the vacation crowd

Chagall - his paintings are a visual cue for the play's sensibility, he also painted for theatre productions in Russia early in his career

chik (*boychik*, *Kakfkachik*)- term of endearment, little loved one *dybbuk* - soul of a dead person that enters a living person. A demon who takes possession of someone. Name of a famous Yiddish play.

Esther - a biblical Jewish Queen who saved her people.

fletcherizing - to overchew your food, obsessive masticating, how Kafka ate

Galicia - a province of Poland/Austria, once heavily populated by Jews.

German Jew - German Jews were seen as more modernized, secular, assimilated into Gentile society, as self-appointed elite who snubbed other Jews.

Golem - from Hebrew, matter without shape. Great Golem myth involving Rabbi Loew in Prague (1600) who makes a creature out of clay and brings it to life. A Yiddish play, 1921 by H. Leivick.

goyish - of Gentiles, not Jewish. Pejorative at times. Heartless, not gentle. Cold, secular, intellectual, without God.

hey mish (haimish) - homey, cozy, warm, informal, sentimental, full of family and heart and hearth. Very loving Jewish.

kabala - the complex and esoteric body of Jewish mystical tradition, literature and thought. Reason alone cannot penetrate the mystical - need reverie and revelation. If you studied it without preparation, you could become lost in it. Link to the unfathomable mysteries of God. Abracadabra is a magical word from the kabala.

kaka - shit, poo, German slang. *kakania* - shitville, penned by the writer Robert Musil of Vienna who wrote *A Man Without Qualities*, who was a contemporary of Kafka's.

katzenjammer - whining cats, German for hangover, was an early cartoon strip, Katzenjammer kids.

kibitz - second guess, needle, comment, advise without actually helping *kleynkunst* - miniature theatre - sketches, cabaret, etc.

lambkin - kin is a diminutive as *chik* is in Yiddish *l'chayim* - to life. *Mazel tov* is good luck. *literatátnik* - a devotee of literature.

luftmentsh - someone with their head in the clouds, someone who lives on air, a spiritual ungrounded person, dreamy sensitive poet, a soaring soul, a fiddler on the roof, someone with faith and optimism

mentsh - a good generous soul, a sweet spirited type, gentle and kind and unassuming, decent and honorable, someone you enjoy being around for those reasons

Mutter/Vater - German. Mother/Father *_nik* - an ardent practitioner or devotee of something: beatnik

Odessa - a place mentioned for its nostalgic resonance, back then in the golden days when Jews lived a superior life in Odessa (Ukraine).

oy vey - o pain! *_payats* - clown *_peh* - a curse *_pupick* - term of endearment, bellybutton *_schm-* to go fat-schmat, fancy-schmancy is to use a Yiddish linguistic device

schmuck - dope, jerk, boob - a dick, means penis

schnorrer - beggar

Shalom Aleichem - peace unto you. Also the penname of the great beloved father of Yiddish

literature, mostly about *shtetl* life. *Fiddler on the Roof* was based on his stories about Tevye. Died 1916. The Yiddish Mark Twain.

shayner - beautiful

shiksa - an unmarried Gentile female

shmutz - dirt, mess, etc.

shnuk - ineffectual person, sad sack, Ameridish expression

shtetl - self-contained ghetto village of Eastern European Jews

shtik - vaudeville lazzi, clowning, cheap way to get audience attention

shtup - crass expression of having sex

Slovbikish - Ken invention, somewhere near Galicia

Song of Songs - erotic poetry in the Bible, a female lover speaking of missing her lover, woman and a man, or God and the Church - has been suggested it was written by a woman

spoonged - vulgar sexual expression_

tzittzit - kisses - fringes at the corners of the prayer shawl

SOME FACTS:

Kafka lived in Prague 1883-1924, A German speaking secular Western Jew in a Christian majority Czech country ruled by the Emperor Josef of Austria/Hungary empire. He lived in his parent's home for most of his life. He worked in an insurance company, was well-liked, and died short of his 41st birthday of TB.

Kafka has become identified with Modernism, man's alienation to himself, society and power, the 20th Century of absurdity/nightmares - Kafkaesque has become an adjective for not being able to escape the labyrinth/morass/de-Godded self-centered human condition. Kafka never used the word Jew in any of his fiction. Kafka loved life and had a great sense of humor - he was a *mentsh* to the injured on their insurance claims.

Felice Bauer was his fiancée, twice. She did move to America eventually, she kept his letters. He met Felice around the same time he became introduced to the Yiddish theatre by Brod and was writing the chapters for a book Max entitled *Amerika*. (1911-1912 - *AmeriKafka* begins in 1924 and conjures up those times as active memory/imagination in 1924.)

Itzhak Löwy was the young leader of a traveling Polish *Yiddish Theatre troupe* and he did become friends with Franz. *Mrs. Klug* was a member. Franz was enamored of the actress and other actresses. They performed on a make-shift stage at the *Cafe Savoy*. Löwy was killed at Treblinka in 1942.

Elli, Valli, Ottla were born 1889, 1890, 1892 and are Franz's three younger sisters who are 6-9 years younger than he is. Their full names are Gabrielle, Valerie and Ottilie. All three were murdered in concentration camps.

Amerika is an unfinished novel by Kafka titled by Max. Kafka titled it *The Man Who Vanishes*. He never wrote an end. Karl Rossman is the protagonist (not Frankie K). The first chapter was published. Kafka loved to entertain himself and others by reading chapters to his friends.

Die Amerikanerin is a Yiddish play written by Hymen Mysell, but it is not the imaginary play in **AmeriKafka**. The following actual Yiddish plays are referenced/used in AmeriKafka: *The Dybbuk* (1920), *The Golem* (1921), *Die Amerikanerin*, *The Bartered Bride*, *God, Man and the Devil*, *The Wild One*, *The Witch*.

Yiddish literary renaissance was 1900-1940. Migration to America and the break-up of feudal Russian economy helped spur it. When Hitler and others murdered the heartland of Eastern Europe, they wiped out this cultural movement. *Issac Bashevas Singer* Nobel prize winner, was a Yiddish writer. His early autobiography *Lost in America* was used as a resource for *AmeriKafka*. *Der Payatz* by *Herman Yablokoff*, an autobiography of a Yiddish actor who comes to America was also used.

Stella Adler comes from a famous family of Yiddish Theatre actors (the Barrymores of Yiddish Theatre.) *Jacob Adler* is a famous Yiddish actor.

Miriam Orleska originated the role of *Leya* in *The Dybbuk* and later died in a concentration camp.

Shalom Aleichem was a famous Yiddish writer of Shtetl life. His short stories were turned into the musical *Fiddler on the Roof*. 1960's saw a resurgence in cultural interest in Yiddish culture.

The Joys of Yiddish by Leo Rosten is a great resource book about the language (some call jargon) and explains the life and pronunciation of the language. Also alluded to in the play: *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, *Gilbert and Sullivan*, nursery rhymes, *Chagall* paintings (he painted backdrops for Yiddish theatre in Russia.) *Democracy in America* by Alexis de Tocqueville was used as research.

There was a *federal theatre project* - (*The Cradle Will Rock*, etc.)_

There was a Yiddish Theatre in *Omaha, Nebraska* that Yiddish touring companies would perform.