

Metamorphosis, Bristol Old Vic

Based on Franz Kafka's novel of the same name and adapted for the stage by Lemn Sissay OBE, Frantic Assembly's Metamorphosis is a timely production examining the effects of burnout and familial expectation.

Gregor Samsa is a hard worker; a go-getter; a provider. But Gregor Samsa needs a break – and he's not going to get one any time soon. Or ever, for that matter.

Spending all the hours God sends in pursuit of the cold, hard cash his mother, father and sister depend on, Gregor's sense of self takes a hit, and the young Mr Samsa is horrified to find himself morphing into an insect-like creature despised by the very family for whom he worked so tirelessly. So goes Kafka's timeless 1915 novella – and now, Frantic Assembly's stage adaptation.

As with anything from Frantic, movement is top of the agenda. The cast is predictably adept at lifting and spinning, dodging and dashing; Gregor himself (Felipe Pacheco) can often be found scuttling across his bedroom ceiling or swinging upside down from its crusty light fixture. It's what one would expect from a company that made a name for itself by breaking physical boundaries on stage, but the choreography never fails to impress – and this show's uber-physicality finds a perfect partner in Sissay's poetic script. Verse-like dialogue bleeds into movement and movement into dialogue, neatly mirroring the boundless mania that Gregor, in his new cockroach form, must endure 24/7.

Despite some confident acting (not to mention the highly accomplished ceiling-scuttling), perhaps the most attention-grabbing part of this production is its use of set. Gregor's dismal bedroom is strikingly askew from the off: its ceiling runs at a slant, one corner hunched higher than the other, while the floorboards seem to slope up, up and away from the audience. And as Gregor's internal compass loses its bearings, so too does the architecture surrounding him lose its foundations. The bedroom walls ripple and twist, bringing a dizzying – and rather vital – energy to the action on stage. Lighting Designer Simisola Majekodunm's clever use of projection deserves a nod too, as it allows *Metamorphosis* to nimbly sidestep the issue of whether to physically transform Gregor into an insect. Instead, his shadow is given a twitchy, antennae-d outline, the suggestive quality of which proves rather impactful. As Gregor himself wisely bemoans, "everything sounds louder in the head"; and so too is the *idea* of a man turned into a giant cockroach more unsettling than its costumed reality might well be.

It seems an apt time to be putting Kafka's text centre stage. With workplace burnout at an all-time high, Gregor's predicament is one with which many audience members will be familiar – albeit minus the insectile result (we hope). The System to which we so wholeheartedly dedicate ourselves is one that takes, takes and takes until you're spent. At which point, it will roll in a Shiny New You, and start the process all over again. *Metamorphosis* is a modern parable warning its audience members to keep a firm hold of themselves when faced with the pressures of buying, selling – and working. Push yourself too far, and you might not recognise yourself come morning.

Frantic Assembly's *Metamorphosis* is playing at Bristol Old Vic until 20 January. Tickets are available at <https://bristololdvic.org.uk/whats-on/metamorphosis>.