



Read all about it — and it will all be lies. The Last Days Of Mankind at Turin

A THEATRE FOR MARS

Interest in Karl Kraus keeps growing, writes Desmond Christy. Masolino d'Amico looks at how Turin reacted to an 'Etna of hate'

UNPERFORMABLE is the word often used to describe Karl Kraus's mammoth documentary drama, *The Last Days Of Mankind*. Even the play's preface begins: "The performance of this drama, which by earthly standards would take ten evenings to perform, is intended for a theatre on Mars. Theatregoers in this world would not be able to endure it. For it is the blood of their blood, and its contents are from those unreal, inconceivable years, those years that no waking consciousness can apprehend, that are inaccessible to any memory and preserved only in a bloody dream, those years in which figures from operetta enacted the tragedy of mankind."

But don't talk to actors and directors about unperformability. They keep proving that Kraus's play, though it has over 200 scenes, works in terrestrial theatres, too. Mind you, the production in Turin which La Stampa's

critic reviews for us below, takes place in one of this planet's more unusual theatre spaces, the Presse of the former Fiat car factory, Lingotto. It will be one of the last cultural events to be staged before Lingotto is transformed over the next few years into a Centre for Innovation using designs by the celebrated Genoese architect Renzo Piano (the man who designed the Pompidou Centre, with Richard Rogers, and who has also designed the world's biggest architectural project, Japan's Kansai International Airport). Lingotto will be a place where technology, culture and recreation meet. Visitors will even have access to the car racing track on top of the old car factory. Turin should have something the rest of Europe will want to visit.

Meanwhile Turin's Teatro Stabile is tackling one of the world's biggest theatrical projects, a play written by one of those Great Writers who seems to be quoted more

often than they are actually read. Some of the following aphorisms may be familiar: "Journalists write because they have nothing to say, and have something to say because they write."

"What is the Ninth Symphony compared to a pop tune played by a hurdy-gurdy and a memory!"

"Medicine: 'Your money and your life!'"

"Psychoanalysis is that mental illness for which it regards itself as therapy."

These are taken from *Half-Truths And One-And-A-Half-Truths* (translated by Harry Zohn, Carcanet £5.95), but to really start to grasp their full significance the reader needs to learn more about the man and culture which gave birth to them. For English readers this has become much easier since the publication of Edward Timms's *Karl Kraus: Apocalyptic Satirist* (Yale £10.95) and, for those lucky enough to see it, the Glasgow Citizens four-hour production of

The Last Days Of Mankind (Edinburgh Festival, 1983). Now, too, we can read what Italy has made of Kraus the satirist as documentary-dramatist, this man who once noted: "The Census has revealed that Vienna has 2,030,834 inhabitants. Namely 2,030,833 souls and me." Elias Canetti who said, admiringly, that Kraus carried "an Etna of hate" inside him, interpreted Kraus's remark like this: "Such a claim has never been made so nakedly, one might call it a fluke that it exists in this terrest of all wordings. It stands behind the 30,000 pages of the *Fackel* [The Torch, Kraus's journal] . . . This claim signifies that the One can challenge these millions, it contains his murderous intention as he confronts the total population of a metropolis, each and every single one, and it is important that this city be named by its name: Vienna."

How many of us are citizens of Kraus's Vienna?

WHISPERS ON THE WAY TO WAR

LA STAMPA

IT IS not the form or theme that is the obstacle in Kraus's masterpiece, *The Last Days of Mankind*. It is the material he uses to give credibility to his account. It has been calculated that at least 50 per cent of the play consists of quotations from newspapers, circulars, conversations overheard in the street, etc., from 1914 to 1918. All of these serve to illustrate the deaf, inflexible and homicidal stupidity of the bourgeoisie.

The bourgeoisie wants, accepts or endures the war, camouflaging myopic interests, and conspiring to make it worse with ever more contemptible atrocities, through their rhetoric, meaningless speeches, prejudices, hypocrisy and so on.

We flash through hundreds of brief scenes gathered from those five fatal years, moments captured haphazardly in Viennese cafés, on the streets, at the front, or at the desk of some big shot.

Every so often, a character called "the Grumbler", the author's only mouthpiece, declaims in verbose desperation, but nobody listens to him. Thanks to the magnificent and convincing performance of Massimo de Francovitch, the Grumbler's rambling eloquence managed to instil a few sporadic tremors of passion into the evening's performance at the Lingotto Theatre.

But there was something missing: a sense of the soil

from which these passions arose. It is precisely that background of foolish comments — the inexhaustible repertoire of embarrassing moments, often revealing the identities of the participants — with which Kraus erected an anti-monument to Vienna, one comparable to the Paris of Flaubert's *Bouvard et Pécuchet*.

Could Italian actors ever recreate the gossip, the catchphrases and the idle rumours circulating in the capital of an empire that disappeared more than 70 years ago, with all the innuendo

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and insinuations, even when they wear the splendid period costumes designed by Gabriella Pescucci? What kind of reaction can a modern audience have to reading war propaganda leaflets issued by the Alliance?

Whatever the case, the director, Luca Ronconi, did not spend a great deal of time puzzling this over. Once more in his glorious career he gives us the impression of being somebody who wished to climb a forbidding mountain simply because it was

there. Kraus's text, which burns with sarcasm and is run through with sulphurous moods, becomes a pretext for marvellous, if somewhat static, choreography, which would appear to be an end in itself.

But it is indeed marvellous, and faultlessly organized. Unlike other machines made by Ronconi, this one works beautifully, and the technicians who made it possible get a deserved round of applause (set design by Daniele Spisa, lighting by Sergio Rossi).

The director greets the public with an initial spectacle of two rows of old line-type machines lining the central aisle of the Lingotto, whose compositors are shouting "Extra! Extra!" and announcing the assassination at Sarajevo.

Then, gliding along well-oiled rails down the side aisles and the far wall of this deconsecrated cathedral to industry, café tables complete with their habitués and newspapers mounted on stands begin to emerge, along with period steam trains and carriages, period cars, cannons and machine-guns with sandbagged lookout posts and laden tables.

Standing upright in the centre of this majestic space, the spectators are often divided by efficient pathfinders making way for platforms on wheels pushed along by other incumbents, on which single actors or groups bring to life various moments of the play, as in a medieval auto-da-fé. This way many more scenes can

be performed simultaneously along the aisles, so the spectator can choose where to focus attention.

It is usually impossible to hear anything that is said. When the director wishes to place emphasis on a particular moment, for instance the Grumbler's comments directed at his foolish antagonist the Optimist (the excellent Luciano Virgilio), amplifiers are used so that no matter where the actor is positioned, his voice thunders down to everyone from above (sound by Hubert Westkemper).

The moment of greatest visual effect during the 3½ performance is our very first glance. Other visually rewarding moments include the arrival of the steam engines — stunning in their elegance — a couple of individual scenes further on and the final parade of characters on their platforms with the delayed entrance of cabaret-style groups singing ironic little ditties.

But during the long periods dominated by the sound of buzzing voices, the best thing to do is wander around looking at things distractingly (in some instances even hangings take place for no apparent reason), meeting old friends or going for a cup of coffee.

The 60 actors certainly showed their worth, although very few of them had any opportunity to stand out. The public applauded some of the individual scenes and warmly applauded those who made such an evening possible.