

# THE GAY APOCALYPSE, Now

THE LAST DAYS OF MANKIND  
KARL KRAUS  
LINGOTTO, TURIN

Karl Kraus's last days of mankind are, of course, no such thing; he describes a rotten, vainglorious moral universe which is outside time, a permanent testament to the petty duplicities and monstrous brutalities which feed on each other with a remorseless logic born of humanity's inability to cry: enough. The 1914/1918 conflict was, after all, the war to end wars; but look where we are now.

Luca Ronconi's remarkable production of Kraus's "unperformable" work at the former car factory of Lingotto exploits the venue's scale to create a bleak world of chaos, sadness, false triumphalism and absurd posturing. At a shade under four hours, it is a tough evening, in every sense. The audience wanders in the centre of the massive hall while the action alternates all around between Vienna's busy Ringstrasse and the trenches on the front.

There is little consistency of pace or tone; sometimes formal, funereal, dignified; others frantic, cluttered and bordering on the burlesque. This is both the strength and weakness of the production. If at times the attention wanders, then so it does when following any report of mass slaughter after a while. Evil too quickly becomes banal, the apocalypse can be gay, tranquillity may co-exist happily with massacre.

Gradually however, the extraordinary tableaux begin to unpick the horrible story of war; (real) trains cart young soldiers to their deaths while café intellectuals affirm the bracing qualities of struggle; young women bask in the glories of patriotic fervour

while their beaux march in sacrificial unison. One cannot keep track of all that is happening; while happy newcomers to the front proudly take pictures of one another, others across the way die under a thundering bombardment.

But while the cannons make the loudest noises, it is the insistent clamouring of the printing presses surrounding the hall, the shouts of the newsvendors, which finally make the more telling impact. "If only we had imagination instead of newspapers," cries Kraus's Critic, whose debates with the Optimist form the play's philosophical core; "Not that the press has put into motion the machines of death; it has merely emptied our hearts."

The power of words, indeed. Rabid patriots tour the Austrian capital's avenues rubbing out letters to purge posters of their foreign influences while the piles of newspapers are transported, ever-more feverishly, to the crass opinion formers, judging ignorantly and condemning casually more trainfuls to their agony.

But *The Last Days of Mankind* is not an anti-war play; it is rather an extended visual essay on the impossibility of peace. Humanity's victims are tragic precisely because they have to atone for an unknown crime; the future provides little solace. In Kraus's dark vision, ways of thought become as deeply embedded as the trenches of the front, and there is, after all, a natural continuity between the elegant pronouncements at home and the murders abroad.

In the Critic's final, moving denunciation, the play's real theme is made explicit: the betrayal of intellectual conscience. "I conserve documents for an age which will no longer understand them, or which will live so far from where we live today that they will consider me a forger." Kraus's testimony looks all too real from here.

PETER ASPDEN