

FRANZ KAFKA
CANCELS HIS CELL
PHONE PLAN

A COMEDY IN ONE ACT BY
Kirk Shimano



CLASSROOM STUDY GUIDE

Introduction

A modern absurdist play that puts elements from three of Franz Kafka's works into the context of the everyday absurdities of our 21st-century lives.

Playwright Bio

Kirk Shimano is a playwright based in Vancouver, British Columbia. His works tend to live on the intersection of Gay Street and Nerdy Avenue, having explored the human side of lovesick zombies, overbearing Mesopotamian deities, and insecure robots. A previous resident of San Francisco, he has worked with a number of theatre companies in the Bay Area indie scene.

By day, Kirk works as an engineer in the movie visual effects industry, an experience which was dramatized in his hero creature work. He makes tools for artists who illuminate imaginary things with lights that do not actually exist.

Synopsis

Will Franz Kafka ever succeed in escaping his mobile phone contract? Will the Inspector's mysterious charges ever be revealed? And will someone turn into a giant insect somewhere along the way?

Characters

FRANZ KAFKA: The hero of our story, an everyman just trying to accomplish a simple task.

GARDENA: Long-term employee at the cell phone store. Being helpful is against her religion.

BARNABUS: A more recent addition to the cell phone store. Happy to help where he can!

THE INSPECTOR: An inspector.

HULD: A prodigiously skilled elocutionist and arbitrator, but you've probably already heard of him by reputation.

Themes

Censorship, Economic Issues, Morality, Personal Responsibility, Technology

Pre-Read Questions

- ★ What is an adaptation? Name an example of an adaptation you know.
- ★ Have you ever heard of Franz Kafka? Which of his stories are you familiar with?
- ★ What does absurdism mean to you?
- ★ Is it important to have a cell phone? Why or why not?

Pre-Read Activities

Adaptation Exercise

- ★ Divide students into groups. Give each group a short poem as their source material. The point is for students to work quickly.
- ★ Discuss the definition of adaptation, and adaptations that students may know.
 - » Adaptation definition: to make something suitable for a new purpose, to modify, to alter
- ★ The goal of the exercise is to have students adapt the poem into a scene. They don't have to use the words of the poem, but the scene must be connected to the poem. Remind students that they are making something suitable for a new purpose. That means the adapted version must have theatrical qualities.
 - » What characters can be derived from the poem?
 - » What location can the scene take place in, as indicated by the poem?
 - » What conflict can be derived from the poem?
- ★ The scene should be less than one minute. Give groups time to discuss, create, rehearse, and present.

- ★ Afterward, discuss the similarities and differences in the scenes. Hopefully there will be differences! This will show students that there is not just one way to adapt material.
- ★ Also, discuss the process. What were the challenges? How did they modify and alter for a new purpose?

Research Project: Author

- ★ Divide students into groups and give them a limited amount of time to research the author of the original stories, Franz Kafka.
 - » Who was Franz Kafka?
 - » What was his background?
 - » How many stories did he write?
 - » What inspired his stories?
 - » Was he a “successful” writer?
 - » Was there any criticism of his writings?
 - » What does the term Kafkaesque mean?
- ★ Decide how students will share their knowledge. Will they create a scene based on what they’ve learned? An oral presentation with a visual component? A quiz? Give students a way to demonstrate what they’ve learned

Research Project: Kafka’s Stories

Divide students into three groups and give them a limited amount of time to research one of the stories *Franz Kafka Cancels His Cell Phone Plan* is based on: *The Trial*, *Metamorphosis*, or *The Castle*.

- » What happened in this story?
- » Who are the characters?
- » What is Kafka trying to say with this story?

- » What themes are in this story?
- » How was this story received critically?
- ★ Decide how students will share their knowledge. Will they create a scene based on what they've learned? An oral presentation with a visual component? A quiz? Give students a way to demonstrate what they've learned.

Kafka Adaptation Exercise

- ★ As a class, read a small section from one of Kafka's texts (*The Castle*, *Metamorphosis*, *The Trial*).
- ★ Discuss the definition of adaptation, and adaptations that students may know.
 - » Adaptation definition: to make something suitable for a new purpose, to modify, to alter
- ★ Divide students into groups. Each group will have a copy of the original section. Their first task is to identify characters, locations, and possible lines of dialogue.
- ★ Next, groups are to discuss, decide, rehearse, and come up with a one-minute section of a scene. This is an exploration, rather than an assessed assignment. How do you adapt? What are the challenges?
- ★ After groups present, discuss the similarities and differences in the scenes. Hopefully there will be differences! This will show students that there is not just one way to adapt material.
- ★ Also, discuss the process. What were the challenges? How did they modify and alter for a new purpose?

Theme Exploration

- ★ Put students into five groups and assign each group a theme from the play.
- ★ Tell students that based on the research they've done about each story and the theme they are assigned they are going to create a tableau representing this theme.
- ★ Once each group has created their tableau, have them present.

- ★ After each group presents their tableau discuss:
 - » How did you work together as a group to create your tableau?
 - » What challenges did you face as you created your tableau?
 - » What stood out to you in the other tableaux you saw?
 - » After seeing the tableaux, how do you infer these themes will come up in the play?

Close Reading Analysis Questions

Close reading is an analysis tool. Students read a text multiple times for in-depth comprehension, striving to understand not only **what** is being said but **how** it's being said and **why**. Close reading takes a student from story and character to drawing conclusions on author intention. Close reading prompts students to flex their thinking skills by:

- ★ Teaching students to engage with a text.
- ★ Teaching students to be selective. We can't highlight everything in the text, only the most important elements.
- ★ Teaching students to make educated decisions. All conclusions and opinions must be backed up with a text example.

Have students analyze *Franz Kafka Cancels His Cell Phone Plan*, individually or in groups, using the following text-dependent questions:

Read One: What is happening?

1. What is the name of the cell phone store?
2. Who is the manager of The Castle? Where is he?
3. Why does Kafka want to cancel his cell phone plan?
4. Why does the Inspector show up? Who is he arresting?
5. What do you think Kafka's charges are?

6. Who is Huld? How does he appear?
7. What is Barnabus's secret?
8. What does Huld see when he opens the closet door?
9. What is the verdict the Inspector comes up with?
10. What day is it in the play?

Read Two: How is it happening?

1. Why do you think the author chose to name the store Castle? What do you think castle means?
2. How does Kafka's tone change throughout the play as he is told he cannot cancel his cell phone plan? Cite the text to support your answer.
3. How does the playwright use imagery to help you imagine what The Castle looks like?
4. How does the playwright's use of language help you distinguish between each character? How does it create a distinct personality? Explain. Use examples from the text to support your answer.
5. Why do you think the playwright distinguishes between quite and great on page 11? What is the significance of each word?
6. How does the playwright use irony throughout the script? Cite an example from the text to support your answer.
7. How does the playwright use metaphors throughout the script? Cite an example from the text to support your answer.
8. What do you think Kafka turning into a roach symbolizes?
9. How do you believe the play resolves itself at the end? Why does the playwright choose this ending?

Read Three: Why is it happening?

1. How do you think the playwright chose which Kafka stories to include in this adaptation?
2. What are the themes in *Franz Kafka Cancels His Cell Phone Plan*?
3. What do you think will happen to the next customer who goes to The Castle?
4. Which line in the play resonated with you the most? Why? What did the author want you to take away from this line?
5. How does the author want you to feel after you read this story?
6. Do you believe this adaptation stays true to the original stories of Franz Kafka? Why or why not?

Post-Read Questions

- ★ What is one question you still have about the play?
- ★ Which character resonated with you the most and why?
- ★ What was your biggest takeaway from the play?
- ★ Is there anything you would change about the adaptation? Why or why not?

Post-Read Activities

Movement Exploration

- ★ Tell students you to begin walking around the space as themselves. They should walk at normal speed and can make eye contact with one another or interact as they see fit.
- ★ As they walk, tell students you are going to call out different character names and they are going to explore the character's walk. How does this character move? Fast or slow? What is their posture like? Each character should have a distinct walk to match their distinct personality.

- ★ As students walk around as characters tell them to interact with each other. How does this character make eye contact? Do they say hello?
- ★ Repeat this exercise with each character. After exploring the five characters tell students to pick their favorite and walk around the space as that character. Once the students develop their walk, tell them to interact with one another. How does this character interact with other people?
- ★ Once the activity is over discuss:
 - » Which character was your favorite to explore and why?
 - » What did you notice that surprised you about your peers as you walked around? Did any walk stand out? Why?
 - » Were any of the walks difficult to figure out? Why?
 - » How did you feel as you walked around as each character? What did you learn about these characters when you stepped into their shoes?

Poster Design

- ★ Based on what you've read, design a poster for the play. How would you visualize the play in a single image that would attract an audience? What font would you use for the title? What information other than the title would you include?

Staged Scenes

- ★ Divide students into small groups and assign each group a scene from the play, or a short moment within a scene.
- ★ Give students time to rehearse.
- ★ Each group will present their moment.
- ★ Discuss the scenes afterward:
 - » How did seeing the scenes acted out differ from reading them?
 - » Why is it important to act a scene as well as read it?

- » Did any of the presentations offer a different interpretation of the characters than yours?

Kafka Tableaux

- ★ Put students into groups of four and assign each group one of the three Kafka stories mentioned in the play: *Metamorphosis*, *The Castle*, or *The Trial*.
- ★ Tell students they are going to create three tableaux for the story they are assigned. The first tableau will show the beginning of the story, the second will show the middle, and the third will show the end. Then have students create transitions between each tableau to tell the story.
- ★ Once students have created their tableaux, have them present.
- ★ After every group has presented discuss:
 - » What stood out in any of the tableaux you saw?
 - » What questions did you have about your story? How did you answer them?
 - » What challenges did you face when creating the tableaux? How did you overcome them?
 - » What was your favorite part of your story? Why?
 - » What parts of your story did you think were the most important to include in your tableaux? How did you decide to incorporate them?

What Happens Next?

- ★ Put students into groups of four and tell them they are going to write a scene that discusses what would happen next in the play. Give each group a scenario to work with. For example, does the janitorial staff come in? Does another customer come in? Does Franz Kafka turn back into a human? Allow students to get creative with their scenarios.
- ★ Tell students their scene should be no longer than two minutes.
- ★ Give groups about 10–15 minutes to work on their scenes. This is more about exploration than perfection.

- ★ Once students are done, have them present their scenes.
- ★ After each group performs discuss:
 - » What stood out to you about the scenes you saw?
 - » What inspired your scene?
 - » What challenges did you face when creating your scene? How did you overcome them?

Gibberish

- ★ Once Kafka turns into a roach, characters are no longer able to understand him and he must communicate his emotions via sounds. Tell students they are going to play an improvisation game that involves sounds just like Kafka.
- ★ Two students will play out a scene using only sounds and gibberish, no words.
- ★ Two other students will serve as the interpreters and translate what the students in the scene are saying.
- ★ Repeat this activity with other students until everyone who wants to gets a chance to go or time has run out for this activity.
- ★ After playing the improv game discuss:
 - » How did this help you understand how Kafka must have felt when he couldn't talk?
 - » Was it easier to speak gibberish or be the translator? Why? Which did you enjoy more?
 - » What challenges did you face throughout this activity? How did you overcome them?
 - » What did you notice while watching people's improv scenes? What stood out to you?

Playwright Process

Playwright Kirk Shimano talks about his process writing and adapting Franz Kafka Cancels His Cell Phone Plan. Have students read and then discuss/reflect on how their perception of the writing process compares to the playwright's.

What was the inspiration for writing this play?

I read *The Metamorphosis* when I was in school and it was a story that stuck in my brain, just like the apple that gets stuck in Gregor Samsa's back. What really struck me was the way such a fantastic story was told in a matter-of-fact way. Years later I found myself wanting to return to the world of Kafka and explore more of his works, and that led me to wanting to create my own story within his world.

What challenges did you encounter during the writing process?

It took me some time to figure out how I wanted to tell these stories. At first, I was leaning towards a more straightforward adaptation, but I found that I was explaining too much instead of living in a Kafka-esque moment. It wasn't until I started thinking about the real life moments that feel the most absurd that this really started to click together. It made me realize that what I like most about Kafka isn't how far out his stories go - it's how close they feel to home.

As a playwright, what is your favourite moment/character in the play and why?

My favorite moment is when Barnabus and Huld compare the experiences of going to court and entering the Castle. As a writer, I had a great time playing with language and trying to craft these circular monologues that mirrored the feeling of being trapped in a bureaucracy. As an audience member, I always enjoy seeing two characters make an unexpected connection. Before this scene, the two characters have no interaction and very little in common, and yet in this conversation they find they have both shared the same kind of experience.

What's your writing process like?

I often start my plays with research, which in this case meant reading many of Kafka's stories (including quite a few more than ended up being directly referenced by this play!). I also read more about Kafka himself to try to understand his context for writing his stories. When it comes time to actually start the writing, though, it's important to put all of the research to the side and focus on the story I want to tell. Here, I had to focus on my version of Franz Kafka as a character and imagine how he would feel in this situation. I also did multiple read-throughs focusing on each of the different characters, making sure that each had their own motivations and perspectives. I know a play is ready when it feels like each character has their own distinct voice and it's their different needs that drive the play forward.

What engages you about playwriting?

I always enjoy being able to engage the imagination and to find creative ways to tell stories about our world. I hope that this play gives both performers and audiences the opportunity to explore how some intriguing ideas from the past can be reflected in our very modern day world, while hopefully having a lot of fun along the way!