



Stage design for JOSEF by Paul Steinberg

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JOSEF – Synopsis of an Opera

JOSEF is the story of Josef Herman, who wakes up on the morning of his thirtieth birthday and refuses to go on with the routine of his daily life. Dreams and nightmares haunt him, forewarning him of a terrible disaster, which will not only be his own personal doom, but threatens the whole city and possibly the entire continent.

The dreams, which he is unable to fathom, prevent him continuing a life which has become meaningless. No longer will he get up for the usual breakfast ritual; he will give up his position at the bank and will end his relationship of five years with his lover, Lena.

Josef says **No** to everything he has done in his life so far. He embarks on a long hard journey of discovery of his own self and of the world around him. Pursued by fears, misfortunes and anxieties, he finally goes mad and is committed to a mental institution, where he imagines himself to be the biblical Joseph. Unlike the latter, however, he is incapable of interpreting his own dreams, or those of others. He attains neither royalty nor redress, his share will be but defeat and death.

Meanwhile, in the city, troubling signs appear, yet most citizens are oblivious to them: refugees from the east swamp the city; violence is on the rise. The newcomers are waiting at the port for the ship to take them to the land of their dreams - America. All stability is shaken, the law is trodden upon; plagues are about to break out.

Following the assassination of Crown Prince Ferdinand on June 29, 1914, war breaks out. All citizens, including Josef, are drafted into the army. History, sweeping away everything that stands in its course, forces him out of his room, out of his inner world and his worries, forcing him to take part in the horror which surrounds him.

Will Josef now manage to enter 'his gate', where the reason for and the meaning of his life may be found? Or is it, perhaps, too late, and once again, as in his dreams, he is about to miss the entrance into the self?

There are three axes round which the opera JOSEF revolves:

- a. *The relationships within the Herman family* (father, mother, Josef, Frieda and Rubi). We learn about the father, Jacob, who sees his son's conduct as a betrayal of the family, and abandonment of all assets painstakingly accumulated in the course of three generations - the shop and its respectable clientele. He fears that Rubi, Frieda's gentile husband, will inherit the shop. The father seems to fall apart as Josef's condition deteriorates and the events in the city become menacing. Rubi will, indeed, turn the elegant haberdashery into a butcher's shop and will ride roughshod over the family that had taken him in.
- b. *The historical process* is accelerated by the influx of refugees. The foreigners bring about the deterioration of security, of law and order. Plagues break out. The Crown Prince's assassination triggers the World War. Old established patterns are upset, and are on the verge of crashing, even though the powers wrested in the officer grow (as representative of the authorities).
- c. *Josef's dreams* are the journey toward the possible discovery of a discontented self and, at the same time, a prophecy of the future of the city and of the continent - ominous visions which no one is willing to accept. These dreams come true in a frightening manner in the second act.

Combined, these three axes recreate an assimilated Central European Jewish family, whose traditional mainstays are rapidly giving way, until the catastrophe sweeps away everything in its flow. This process is hastened by the personal disaster in the life of the son, Josef who "tries to instil a semblance of meaning into a world which is in itself utterly meaningless".

The libretto makes use of allusions to scenes in Kafka's writings.