

PHILIP GLASS

(1937)

The Trial

Opera in two acts

ACT I

On the morning of his thirtieth birthday, bank general manager Josef K. is arrested. Guards Franz and Willem cannot explain the charge, and the inspector assures him that his daily routine should not be affected by the arrest. Confused, K. takes the matter lightly at first. That evening, he confides in his landlady, Frau Grubach, and tries to explain himself to his neighbour, Fräulein Bürstner.

K. is summoned to his first hearing, held in a stifling room crowded with officials and defendants. There he delivers a fiery speech, accusing the court of corruption and absurdity. The reactions of those present are mixed, and the judge warns K. that he has lost his advantages. When K. returns a week later for the next session, he finds the courtroom deserted. He speaks with the washerwoman, the usher's wife, who offers him help and affection, until the student Berthold suddenly takes her away to the judge.

At the bank, K. is visited by his uncle Albert, unsettled by the rumours surrounding the trial. He insists that K. hire a lawyer and arranges a meeting with Dr. Huld. Soon afterwards, K. witnesses the cruelty of the system firsthand: the guards Franz and Willem, who once arrested him, are now flogged as punishment for his complaint.

ACT II

K. visits the ailing lawyer Huld, where the devoted nurse Leni both seduces him and warns that he cannot prevail against the Court— his only path lies in confession. His uncle Albert is outraged that K. allows himself to be distracted rather than defending his honour.

Following Leni's advice, K. turns to the painter Titorelli, whose connections reach into the judiciary. From him, K. learns the bitter truth: a genuine acquittal can never be won. Only then does he begin to comprehend the hopelessness of his struggle. At Huld's house, K. encounters the businessman Block, who has been entangled in proceedings for five years, consumed by fear and wholly dependent on his lawyers. Block's fate is a grim warning, reinforcing K.'s decision to dismiss Huld.

In the cathedral, a priest relates the parable of the gatekeeper before the Law, a tale that makes clear K.'s trial was doomed from the start.

On the night before his thirty-first birthday, Josef K. is seized once again by Franz and Willem. They lead him beyond the city walls and, without a word of explanation, execute him. He dies helpless and unresisting—"like a dog."