

## Show of the week

### Metamorphosis



**Making an entrance** *Gisli Örn Gardarsson*

★★★★★

**Lyric Hammersmith** WE

At the spectacular start of David Farr and Gisli Örn Gardarsson's adaptation of Kafka's famous short story, the safety curtain lifts to reveal a dark, conventional dining room circa 1912. But rather than halting at the ceiling, the curtain carries on rising to uncover Gregor's bedroom above where, instead of conformity, everything is skewed. A bed lies flat against the wall and, behind the bed clothes, Gregor, a hard-working salesman, has turned into a beetle.

But there's no beetle-like fancy dress here. Instead, Gardarsson wears a suit throughout. Unlike his family, we are never allowed to forget that Gregor remains a human being. Ever since he first came to this country with 'Romeo and Juliet', the Icelandic actor has taken physical theatre to new peaks of danger and daring. Now, he climbs up walls and scuttles across the bedroom ceiling as if he is scaling the north face of the Eiger. It's heart-in-the-mouth stuff even if, sometimes,

these skills get in the way of the story.

Gregor is a shrinking mix of humility, anguish and passivity, but Gardarsson, a big strong man, touches on little of this, instead confining himself to the pain of eavesdropping on his family. Flashes of disgust compete with stilted mealtime conversations in which his father, mother and sister try to pretend that all is well. Even Gregor's sister (Nina Dögg Filippusdóttir), who initially brings him food, finally abandons him. As family and visitors close ranks, Gregor is seen as a vermin who must be dispatched. Writing in 1912, Kafka appears to predict the persecution of the Jews.

It's a fiendishly difficult piece to adapt – quite apart from the physical challenge, most of the story takes place in Gregor's head. But if Gardarsson could extend his emotional range, this could be very special indeed. Especially chilling is the final flower-strewn image of Gregor's family taking a walk in the bright sunshine, while his dead body swings on a rope below. *Jane Edwards*