English actor and director Michael Jenn is in a perfect position to direct Steven Berkoff’s adaptation of Franz Kafka’s novel, *The Trial* at the Western Australian Academy of Performing Arts, which opens on Friday 12 March for a week-long run in the Roundhouse Theatre.

Jenn has performed in a number of Berkoff’s productions, including a 1992 Australian tour of *Salome* which played in Perth at His Majesty’s Theatre, and so understands first-hand the techniques favoured by this dynamo of British theatre.

“As an actor you get very used to starting with the text and then building up your character and blocking always comes into it,” explains Jenn. “Berkoff works the other way around, I mean he’s absolutely passionate about words and text but for him the physical movement and choreography of the piece is as important as the text.”

It is this physical exploration of the text that Jenn will bring to his direction of WAAPA’s 3rd Year Acting students in *The Trial*.

Based on Kafka’s famous novel, *The Trial* stages the story of a man who is arrested and sent to trial without ever being told what his is charged with. And so begins Joseph K.’s slide into desperation as he tries to grapple with an all-powerful ‘Court’ and an invisible ‘Law’.

With its maddening feeling of inevitability, *The Trial* creates a powerful depiction of 20th century alienation and bureaucracy, a depiction which 85 years later still resonates with modern audiences.

“Kafka and Berkoff: it’s a marriage made in theatrical heaven,” says Jenn. “Berkoff’s trademark non-naturalistic theatrical style matches and heightens Kafka’s surrealist imagination.”

The play, both moving and very funny, vividly explores the absurdity of the hero’s predicament and makes real the novel’s larger-than-life and comic characters.

“Someone must have been telling lies about Joseph K., for without having done anything wrong he was arrested one fine morning.” – first line from Kafka’s novel, *The Trial*.

**Performance Information: The Trial**

Friday 12 – Thursday 18 March at 7.30pm, Matinee Saturday 13 March at 2pm.
Roundhouse Theatre, WAAPA, Edith Cowan University, 2 Bradford St, Mt Lawley.
Tickets are $22 full/$17 concession. Bookings through WAAPA Box Office on 9370 6636.

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For complimentary tickets to this production or for further information, interviews or photo opportunities, please contact:
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Phone: (08) 9370 6817    Mob: 0404 699 772    Email: a.maz@ecu.edu.au
Jenn’s journey: from the Bard to Berkoff

When Michael Jenn graduated from secondary school in Sussex, England, he immediately packed his bags and moved to London, determined to pursue his dream of becoming an actor. For a year before being accepted into the Bristol Old Vic Theatre School, Jenn took any theatre job he could get – even working backstage on West End shows doing props.

Now, some 30 years later, Jenn has well and truly lived his dream. He has enjoyed an acting career studded with memorable moments: working with Geoffrey Rush on the film Quills; being directed by Steven Berkoff nearly a dozen times; performing on world tours that took him from Communist Romania in the frozen depths of winter to the Perth International Arts Festival in summer; and playing an evil demon – complete with prosthetic makeup and flying sequences – on the BBC television series, Merlin.

Jenn has also created a name for himself as a fine Shakespearean actor, working for those venerable institutions of British theatre, the Royal Shakespeare Company, the Old Vic and the National Theatre. In 2008 he trod the boards in one of the West End’s most famous theatres, the Donmar Warehouse, playing Montano in Shakespeare’s Othello. Directed by the Donmar’s Artistic Director, Michael Grandage, and starring Chiwetel Ejiofor as Othello and Ewan McGregor as Iago, this production was the hottest show in London, with a black market ticket costing up to £1200.

That same year, Jenn journeyed to Perth to direct WAAPA’s 2nd Year students in Love, Lust and Revenge, a short season of scenes from Shakespeare. During the rehearsals, Jenn was amazed to find himself forgetting that the actors, production crew and stage management were still only students.

“I know it’s part of the ethos of WAAPA but they were so punctual, they were so focussed, they knew what they were doing. I’ve worked with professional companies in Britain that have less professionalism than this place.”

When, as an enthusiastic 20-year-old, Jenn graduated from his own three years of training at the Bristol Old Vic Theatre School, the industry had an unpleasant reality check awaiting him. Instead of performing, the 20-year-old found himself working as a luggage porter in a hotel.

It was the low-point of his career. But after only three months of “wearing a horrible brown nylon uniform carrying bags for toffy-nosed business men who didn’t give you any tips,” Jenn scored a theatre job and his first film, Another Country.

He rates Another Country as one of his most enjoyable experiences on a film set, along with the nine weeks he spent working on Quills.

“On Quills we had a whole week or more of rehearsals and improvisation, that’s very unusual. I think it was partly because Geoffrey Rush was playing the lead and of course he has a very theatrical background… it was wonderful to improvise with him and research the characters before we started shooting.”

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Jenn cites Rush as someone he would one day like to be directed by, "because he’s such fun to work with", along with Simon McBurney of the British experimental theatre company, Complicite. That Jenn is drawn to this company – known for its strong ensemble work that combines realistic and stylized acting with narrative text, movement, music and visual art – is not surprising, given his long-term working relationship with Steven Berkoff.

“As an actor you get very used to starting with the text and then building up your character and blocking always comes into it,” explains Jenn. “Berkoff works the other way around, I mean he’s absolutely passionate about words and text but for him the physical movement and choreography of the piece is as important as the text.”

Berkoff’s commitment to working as an ensemble also draws Jenn’s admiration.

“Of all the directors I’ve worked with he understands and believes in the ensemble the most, it’s almost like working as part of a Greek chorus. You’ll be moving around as one sort of amorphous mass and then you pop out and do individual lines as the character but then you return to the ensemble. It’s much more in the Central European tradition rather than the British tradition. Britain suffers from this acting malaise of a lot of actors who work from the neck up. Steven works you from your crown to your toes, your whole body.”

“You have to develop your stamina and your flexibility because it’s very demanding stuff that Berkoff does. Salome, which we did here in Perth in 1992, is just over two hours long without an interval and it’s all done in slow motion, it’s all done in stylized movement and you’re doing that for two hours non-stop.”

Now Jenn will be using these experiences to inform his direction of Berkoff’s adaptation of Franz Kafka’s novel The Trial, which opens on Friday 12 March starring WAAPA’s 3rd Year Acting students.

It’s a far cry from Jenn’s first acting role at school, playing the Spanish Ambassador in A Man for All Seasons with a stick-on moustache.

“I was 14, I don’t think I started shaving until I was about 18.” laughs Jenn. “So I was a bit young casting for that… but a character part already!”

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