

The Hunger Artist: A Theatre Piece

by Evelyn Hooven (September 2017)



Painting by Shawn Yu

Suggested by Franz Kafka's short story "A Hunger Artist," to which I am indebted for the title idea of hunger as performance and for the phrase 'sole satisfied spectator' (alleinige zufriedene Zuschauer). For the rest (and in hope that I have kept something of the story's spirit), I take full responsibility.

—The Author

A stage; bravely threadbare remains of a circus; dreariness and menace behind the tinsel; the end of something.

The Impresario

The Hunger Artist

The Crowd

Impresario enters with combined motions of a parking attendant urging a car forward and a conductor asking more from the musicians. Stops. Flings cage upstage and walks diagonally opposite. The Hunger Artist's cage is bedecked with outworn artificial flowers and leaves. In it is a clock that has stopped. Near top of cage a tattered placard reads:

. . . 40 days 41 days 42 days 43 days . . .

Initially one sees only a heap of straw behind the bars.

The Impresario's movements in relation to the Hunger Artist shift and show conflict throughout. They are: withdrawn, impelled, nearly tender, fearful, assaulting.

Sounds of a faraway crowd getting nearer.

IMPRESARIO

(Worn and angry)

I've got to think, dammit! I want them here and nowhere else. No one else's garbage. And they're gonna stay. They're gonna like it.

And if I have anything to say about it--and I do, you mute--it's gonna be the last time!

(Moves as though against his will towards Hunger Artist)

Why didn't you say anything yesterday? Why? Saving your strength to starve another day, showing me up? Well today I'll fix you.

(Kicks the cage; peers in)

Look at you, you're disgusting! The same clothes. Dirt in your cage. I thought someone was to look out for all that. You make me sick!

(Moves center)

It used to be different. A well-kept cage, cushions, expensive season tickets, the placard changed every day--my God, a brass band. You would talk, nod, let the ladies feel your ribs. You were manageable and knew when to stop. Forty days and you ate the meal we gave you. There were times an audience could persuade you to sing. What a laugh to think of it now. All that is so far from you. The only thing that seems to interest you is starving. You're really very far gone. The further out of fashion hunger artists get--the more you want to starve.

You know what I think? I think there aren't going to be any more of you. Not any. Old pioneer, prima donna, no one wants to learn from you. The exercise, the discipline, the faith—bullshit! No one needs it. They hate hunger here. They hate faith. The new blood, the young personalities believe nothing, gorge themselves on everything. They don't even believe you really starve. Not that they care, but if you happen to cross their minds, you're just a skinny man who's clever about taking food when no one is looking. Not even all that clever, since no one is looking lots of the time.

(Crosses diagonal)

I am so sick of this job. Every day I wake up with the feeling I can't make it and drag through saying this is the last time, the last time. We're an old pair by now—something of a charade. They'd never find you another impresario, not if they combed the Sunday picnics and all the Friday bars.

(Sounds of approaching crowd increasingly distinct)

(Figuring it out)

I've got to find some gimmick. People want something that fills up the stage. Now you can't see hunger. You can't even make out that sign. They stopped counting. I told you forty days was enough. No one can even think beyond that. As a matter of fact I don't, myself, know how long you've been at it.

(Goes to cage and looks inside. With something approaching

gruff tenderness)

Some attraction! Some performance! You'd better get up, I hear them.

(No movement. Then a rattle of straw)

Up you go now.

(Hunger Artist makes unsuccessful attempt at rising)

Get up, damn you!

(Impresario pounds viciously on cage. Kicks. Hunger Artist gets up slowly, sits straight and dignified, in a world of his own. He is wearing an old, yellow cape with hood. Simultaneous with slow rising of the Hunger Artist, the following routine by Impresario:

Combs hair

Rubs cheeks

Brushes off clothing

Straightens tie

Uses packet of one-wipe shoeshine

Uses packet of wash and dry

His face assumes more and more of a dapper emcee mask as sounds augment of approaching crowd)

You'd better gather up your forces because this time, when I ask you a question, you're gonna answer me.

(Blustery, like a barker rehearsing)

You are going to witness today the most—

(More modulated. Public charm)

Ladies and gentlemen, welcome one and all. We have been working hard—

(Clears throat)

We have been working day and night to present to you . . .

(Impresario goes to cage, reaches in, brusquely removes Hunger Artist's cape. Exposing a skinny-ribbed figure in tights. Impresario covers cage)

(Noise of crowd. Intermittent cries of babies, flash and click of cameras. Sounds, especially of candy wrappers, scuffling, shuffling, whispering. The crowd can be actual or represented by a screen phantasmagoria reminiscent of Dutch and Flemish paintings of crowds: the small malice beneath apparent normal jollity, producing a grotesque and menacing effect)

. . . the most extraordinary event in this entire—exposition. You show discretion in selecting this stall and also, so to speak, a kind of piety. For the hunger artist, as you may perceive in a moment with your own eyes (and after the show via photographs taken on the eve of his last fast) is no usual

performer. Let your minds rest upon the risks he takes and the necessity, during his fasts, of so great a range of abstinences that, ladies and gentlemen, it staggers and amazes even me, who has been with him so long.

(Figures gather around Hunger Artist's cage. Impresario crosses to cage and puts his hand on cloth covering)

As a special reward for those paying their second or third visit—let's show them a little recognition, please—

(Dutiful applause)

There will occur today, beyond the excitement of seeing this man starve, a little extra bonus. The hunger artist will speak.

(Dutiful recognition)

He will tell his story, answer our questions. You are to be the first audience to whom a hunger artist has actually revealed his secrets.

(Sounds and signals of increased interest. Impresario motions for silence)

I'm going to ask you to restrain somewhat your very natural enthusiasm. And please don't go too near the cage for looks or touches. Let him have air. He needs strength and space.

(Covering up exasperation)

Ladies and gentlemen, I must also ask you to refrain from eating. No, not even creams or chewing gum. We mustn't tempt him. We must make it as easy as possible.

(Sounds of getting rid of food. Impresario pulls cloth off cage. Hunger Artist is lying in the straw. Crowd pulls back. Impresario, making an occasion of this, walks around cage, tapping on it. Hunger Artist slowly pulls himself up. Impresario makes a production number of this, as though he had planned it, encouraging applause from crowd. He proceeds in a very emcee, public manner)

We will begin without further ado. The first is a question that, I'm certain, is in the minds and hearts of all of us. Why did you become a hunger artist? We have to give the man time. He's very weak.

(Low voiced, confidential)

Sometimes it goes to their heads, if you know what I mean.

(Paces: sudden, jerky movement of exasperation)

How does it feel to be a hunger artist? Answer the question, be spontaneous.

(Extended silence. Shuffling of crowd. Impresario paces, reflects)

Were you a poor, deprived, that is disadvantaged child? Your father a failure stretched out in a tavern, your mother arthritic, taking in sewing?

(Moving across the diagonal, menacing, closing in on Hunger Artist)

Did you go without dinner? Get left in the cold? A mere toddler of a boy, face pressed against the dingy window, where a penny chocolate looked like manna?

(Hunger Artist stirs angrily)

Or was 'home' threadbare respectable? And you, the youngest, an accident? Or the oldest --replaced, misplaced by all others? Or the middle one wedged between a brute who gave you nosebleeds and a pale, delicate girl who pulled your hair because you had more than she did?

(Impresario tries to cover up anger with geniality)

Psychology doesn't work on some people.

(Puts finger to forehead, then points accusingly at Hunger Artist)

As you can see, I need your help, folks. Can I count on you?

(Applause)

This is your show, you know. You're the paying customers, it's you who'll ask the questions.

(Official, cheery)

To save time and be absolutely fair to all and one, I'll ask that you write the questions down. They'll be answered at random, no preference shown. You'll find scraps—er sheets of paper and pointed pencils.

(Gesture of raising baton to conduct. Exaggeratedly bright paper-maché box is lowered by nearly invisible string. Oohs and aahs from crowd. Colored papers are given out. Hunger Artist bends his head back. Electronic sound of shuffling, scribbling, during parody—serious singing—electronic song.

He's got the itty-bitty children
IN HIS BOX

He's got you and me

IN HIS BOX

He's got everybody

IN HIS BOX

He's got the whole world

IN HIS BOX

Last minute scribbling. Impresario swiftly collects papers in a single, swooping balletic gesture. Darkness. Abrupt ending to song. Lights. Pastel colored papers mounted very high in box)

This enthusiastic response, ladies and gentlemen, to my faint suggestion is overwhelming.

(Pause)

I'll try to get to as many as possible, time permitting. We will now begin.

(Staccato movements and speech as he lifts one colored paper after another)

Why did you become a hunger artist?

Why?

(Gestures of lifting and tossing many such why's)

How do we know you've really stayed hungry? Since if you cheated just a little how could anyone tell?

What is your purpose?

Have you requests from forthcoming apprentices?

(Clearly ironic response from both Impresario and crowd)

Does fasting hurt?

Are there guards around your cage at night?

For how long do you really fast?

Would you want your children to be hunger artists?

When did you win your first world record?

How many days was your longest fast?

Have there been other hunger artists in your family and are your parents proud of you?

How does it feel to be hungry?

How old were you when you began?

Any special professional training necessary or does it come naturally?

Can you have sex while you fast? In your cage or out? With female or—

(Tosses away)

What is the future of a hunger artist in a technological—

(Tosses away)

What do you do with all the money you save, there in that cage without—

(Tosses away)

How long do you really starve?

How well does professional fasting pay?

If you do without one day just to do without the next, and

your work just leads to more work, why bother?

What do you do for a good time?

If you had it to do all over again . . . ?

(Hunger Artist shakes the bars of his cage, utters a low moan. Impresario, angry and menacing, crosses towards the cage. Pretends to read, then drops the pretense)

I find it difficult to believe that anyone could starve totally for forty days or more. To be sure, it's an accomplishment beyond our powers to forego the customary meals—but tell us—we'll think even more of you for honesty—tell us your gimmick, tell us your hoax. Don't you ever, in the dead of night, ever sneak a morsel of good food? Do you bribe the animal trainer for raw meat and keeping it secret? Does someone come to you—a woman, perhaps—lovely fingers through the bars of your cage, sweetmeats, fruits . . . ?

(Pause)

You need all your strength for starving, do you? Nothing left for us, is there? Don't take away a second from fasting, be superior, do something we can't do, show us up . . . Well I think it's easy. What's hard for you is to stop! You do not consume, buy, rest, join, fix, break, mate, come late, grate, rake, fake, mate. You are the weak and we are the strong. You need us to watch you, but we don't need you. We can switch somewhere else, any time we choose.

(Abortive, quickly curtailed cheers from audience)

Aren't you too insecure to come out of your cage? Why did you become a hunger artist if you weren't afraid? If you didn't need a craft you could practice without acquiring, preparing, complying, responding, depending?

(Cheers)

(Under his breath, aside to Hunger Artist)

I'm going to fix your wagon like it's never been fixed.

(Pause)

Ladies and gentlemen, the hunger artist has no strength to speak to you now.

(Boos)

But I will relate to you a story that the hunger artist, himself, confided once between fasts. I think, trying hard, I can offer it to you word for word.

(Boos from crowd—they're not getting the authentic goods)

Remember you are the first--the very first assembled audience--to hear it.

(Some members of crowd hush the others. Impresario stands beside the Hunger Artist's cage. His impersonation is intended as parody. Whatever comes through of the direct

and serious is against his will. His delivery is meant as reductive and grudging as well as an effort to pander to the public appetite for “psychological lowdown.” What follows is the Impresario’s fabrication, not the Hunger Artist’s truth)

I was reared in comfort by parents who’d known poverty—

Guilt of the one who has it easy.

Nothing that came upon me,

No hurt, break, blow

Could equal their suffering memories.

Exalted themselves for their wounds

Discounting mine—

Have you ever been hungry?

Crammed me with food and lorded it—

Have you ever been hungry?

Noses to the grindstone,

Fingers to the bone,

Just to make it easy for you.

No matter what happened,

No matter how it hurt,

You’ve never been hungry,

It’s easy for you.

Hunger became my idol,

Hunger my god;
In the greenhouse town,
With the jolly cuisinier,
I could have built an altar
To hunger.

(Hunger Artist shakes bars of his cage, then gradually
resigns himself)

You must excuse him ladies and gentlemen, starvation mars the
brain . . . where were we?

One day I bribed a chauffeur
With hoarded pocket money,
Went to the circus and saw him:
From that day on
There was nothing they could do.
Though they got me to try.

Considered: priest, mathematician, married man;

Considered: impersonation of prospering businessman;

(Derisive and contemptuous, increasingly)

Seeking what others wanted
Required submission
To the arts of using weapons,

Saving face.

What no one else wanted

Was entirely mine.

I can depend upon my hunger,

I have something of my own;

I am subject to no one,

I am not alone.

My hunger makes me stronger

(Tittering laughter from crowd)

I could hold my hunger longer

I am mad about my hunger

I am not alone.

(Cheers from crowd. Impresario assumes previous public manner)

It's a strange story, almost of sickness, ladies and gentlemen.

(Hunger Artist tries to speak, is inaudible)

And as your representative, I must not only praise, but condemn. What if everybody became a hunger artist? What would become of incentive—freedom?

(Hunger Artist makes a great effort to gather his strength and speak. Hunger Artist speaks so that only Impresario can hear him. Hushed silence. Impresario gives cage a furtive kick. Hunger Artist speaks haltingly but audibly)

HUNGER ARTIST

None of what you said—It's that I can't surrender—complexity . . . Would I have liked your food?

(Hunger Artist dies. Confusion through crowd. Impresario assumes pontifical manner)

IMPRESARIO

The Lord giveth, the Lord taketh away;

The hunger artist is dead—

(Loudly; a directive to offstage attendants)

Take him away. . . .

(Confusion and discontent through crowd. Someone shouts)

ONE MEMBER OF CROWD

I feel sorry for him. The poor bastard starved to death just to give us a good show.

IMPRESARIO

Ladies and gentlemen, as impresario, one of many things I know, is that a hunger artist, however industrious, is also dangerous.

(Objections from crowd)

If we all became hunger artists, what would induce us to produce? How would we presume to consume? What means obtained to stay entertained? To keep happiness at boom? If we sought to be taught to be stronger and stronger, stay longer and longer, in hunger?

CROWD

Hunger!

IMPRESARIO

Is that, my people, what you want?

CROWD

No!

IMPRESARIO

What you work for by the sweat of your brow?

CROWD

(With disgust)

Oh!

IMPRESARIO

(Arms raised like an orchestra conductor)

Well the Lord giveth, the Lord taketh away,

The last hunger artist is dead.

CROWD

Hooray! Hooray!

(Attendants appear, unceremoniously carry cage off)

IMPRESARIO

He belongs to the ages now. He belongs to you. Ladies and gentlemen, as my own guests and as guests of the house, if you will step this way.

(Departure of most of crowd. Sounds as at beginning. A few remain, dissatisfied; surround Impresario in two's and three's, challenging)

ONE MEMBER OF CROWD

The poor bastard starved to death.

IMPRESARIO

Did you see that clock in there? He never even tried to have it repaired. A man who won't eat and won't keep time is better off dead.

ANOTHER MEMBER OF CROWD

He never did me any harm!

IMPRESARIO

No harm! He scorned the food for which you labor, he scorned the shelter of which you dream . . .

(Derisive)

No harm! That body, ribs out at angles, like too many elbows, is an insult to everything you are, to you, his public, who've given so much, your time, your money . . .

ANOTHER ONE IN CROWD

Once in a while, with nothing better to do, once in a blue moon, we stayed a while and watched the show.

IMPRESARIO

Such modesty! Why, your very own children stood around his

cage, agape with fascination, lost in wonder even at the striking clock—when it struck—not taking their eyes off, as though that one emaciated faster were a great arena, some competitive match or dangerous game.

(Most leave, a very few remain, surrounding the Impresario, menacing him with their skepticism)

If you want to see him, he's not far, don't you remember, that way. If you want to pay your last respects, he's there, but don't look at me . . .

(Stragglng, unconvinced exit. Sounds from general crowd: whimpers, unwrappings, gorgings, clatters. Impresario slumps down)

Jesus, I'm tired . . .

It took quick thinking

To make your dying

Part of the show.

It was a strain

To see that I was the star

And you were the star

Until the end.

And they're still at it.

Maybe you'll have
The kind of death
You'd enjoy; I tried
To arrange it for you;
They're staying and staying
The way I said they would.

(Sudden anger)

And you're suffering till the end
Even past death,
Getting your own way . . .
You! With your stances,
Your loneliness—
Well, this is your last moment,
Your last trace,
And I made it happen.

(Pause)

I wonder if they're going
To tear you apart;
I wonder how ingestible, digestible

You are, hunger—lover . . .
The thought disgusts me
But it wouldn't you . . .
A grandiose ending
Engineered by me;
You, who were in life
The sole satisfied
Spectator of your own fast
Will now become the food they like—
An orgy of mutilation
They'll turn cannibal for you
But who can predict all things?
The autopsists, the archaeologists,
Anatomists might come to see
What made you starve;
Open you up, innards and guts,
Looking for the reason
And the seat of power.
As Nijinsky a bird-foot
So the hunger artist
A bird-belly;
Headline tomorrow

Or maybe even now,

With this question

At the end

As FOOD FOR THOUGHT:

Was there something strange

About his way of nourishment

So it wasn't any skill after all?

(Cage of Hunger Artist thrown onstage, abused condition, clock removed, straw and flowers removed. Body of Hunger Artist thrown onstage, not abused. Sounds of crowd going away)

(To offstage attendants)

Don't give him to me! If none of them want him, why should I?

(Examines body for abuse)

Wouldn't they have you, even to touch or hurt or find you out?

(Sounds of crowd approaching, then moving away)

They're going past. Didn't so much as look this way. Times are no good for impresarios either. I'll have to bury you. When I'm ready. No particular hurry. I wonder which stall they've gone to. No concentration.

(Torn between the routine of getting up an act and making discoveries that surprise him)

I thought you'd bury me, applaud me for unswerving dedication against odds, my verve in the face of . . .

(Groping)

extinction . . . I'd be the first to go. You'd honor me with flowers.

(Pause)

Well—one bone is worth a thousand flowers. Bones last.

(Slow blackout)

The Hunger Artist: A Theatre Piece has had three public readings in New York but has not been available to a wider audience until now.

Evelyn Hooven graduated from Mount Holyoke College and received her M.A. from Yale University, where she also studied at The Yale School of Drama. A member of the Dramatists' Guild, she has had presentations of her verse dramas at several theatrical venues, including *The Maxwell Anderson Playwrights Series* in Greenwich, CT (after a state-wide competition) and *The Poet's Theatre* in Cambridge, MA (result of a national competition). Her poems and translations from the French have appeared in *ART TIMES*, *Chelsea*, *The Literary Review*, *THE SHOp: A Magazine of Poetry* (in Ireland), *The Tribeca Poetry Review*, *Vallum* (in Montreal), and other journals, and her literary criticism in Oxford University's *Essays in Criticism*.

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