

**THEATRE FOR A NEW AUDIENCE**

**DIALOGUES**

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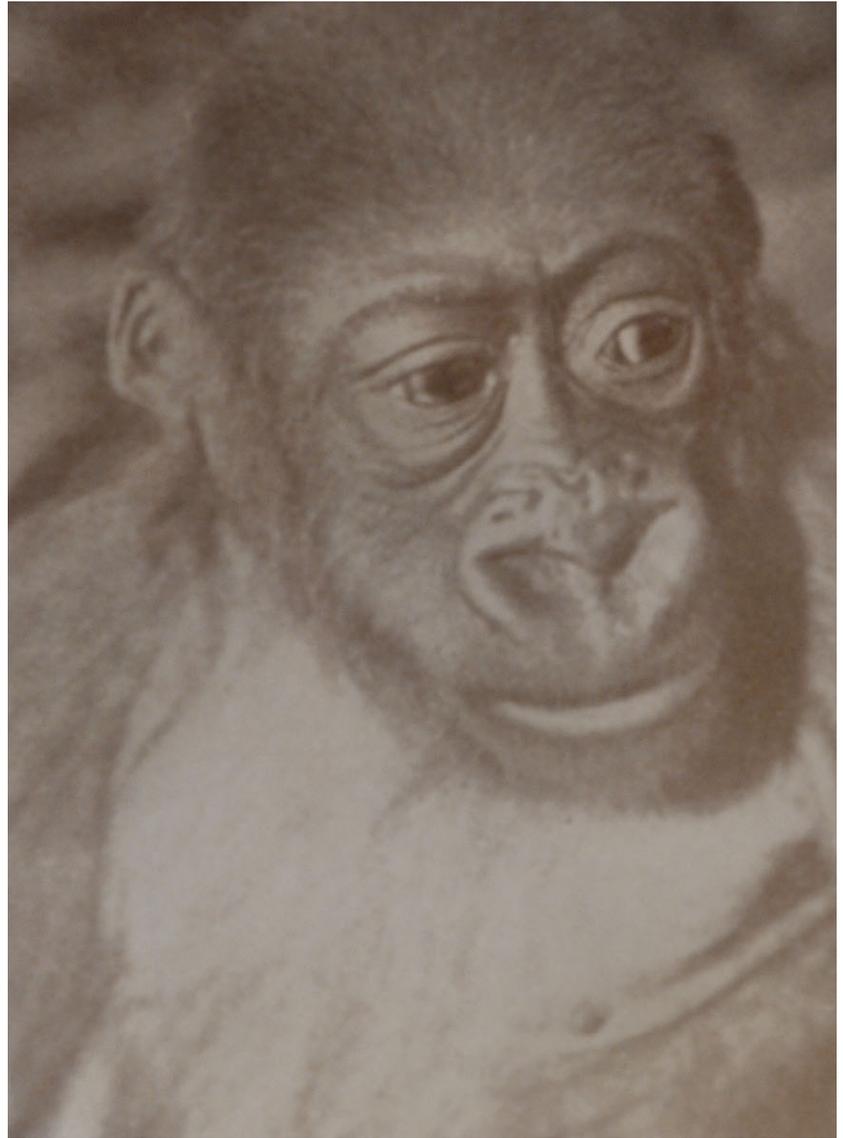
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"Hagenbeck gorilla" projected onto the set of *Kafka's Monkey*, photo by Keith Pattison

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# PERFORMING THE APE, PERFORMING THE HUMAN MARK M. ANDERSON

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**K**afka did not write “Report for an Academy” for the stage. It first appeared in Martin Buber’s journal *Der Jude* (The Jew) in 1917 as one of two “animal tales” and shortly thereafter in the collection of stories entitled “A Country Doctor.” But ever since his encounter with the rag-tag troupe of Yiddish actors who performed in Prague in 1910-11, Kafka was fascinated by the potential of drama for his prose narratives. Indeed, scholars have argued that his breakthrough as a writer with stories like “The Judgment” and “The Metamorphosis” (both written in 1912) was facilitated by his experience of the immediacy and plasticity of these living, speaking bodies directly before the audience. With their vivid use of dialogue, unity of place and action, Kafka’s early stories hew to Aristotle’s definition of drama and virtually invite staged readings and performances, despite the obvious challenges presented by their less than (or more than) human protagonists. Mikhail Baryshnikov, the guiding spirit behind the alternative theatrical spaces in which *Kafka’s Monkey* is taking place, famously turned himself into Gregor Samsa, the “monster bug” in “The Metamorphosis,” for a production on Broadway.

The connection to the Yiddish theater and Buber’s journal suggests a Jewish optic for understanding Red Peter’s transformation from ape into near-human. Kafka’s generation of German-speaking Jews came of age with the appalling spectacle of a failed assimilation. Instead of becoming “good Germans on the street” while retaining their Jewish faith at home, as the Enlightenment philosopher Moses Mendelssohn had urged, many of the Jews who were emancipated during the nineteenth century in Germany and the Austro-Hungarian empire (of which Prague was a part until 1918) had relinquished all but the external trappings of their Judaism. But they remained at the margin of German society, rejected and derided not only as Jews who would never be “truly German,” but also as traitors to their own tradition. The metaphor of the “apes of German gentiles” to disparage the

assimilationist aspirations of the newly rich Jewish bourgeoisie was a common one in Kafka’s time, in Jewish as well as anti-Semitic caricatures. (The movie *Cabaret* uses the idea when the emcee sings a love song to a female chimpanzee, closing with a broad wink to the audience and the words “If you could see her through my eyes / She wouldn’t look Jewish at all.”)

Kafka himself bitterly rued the “nothingness” of real belief that his assimilating parents set as an example, and his enthusiasm for the Eastern European, Yiddish-speaking actors, whose spontaneous and exuberant Jewishness they did not try to hide, remained for him a shining, if painful reminder of his own all-too-rational, repressed and stilted Judaism. Yet however attracted he was to these free-spirits, with their zany, melodramatic skits performed in nightclubs and cafes and vaudeville theaters (the “variety theaters” where Red Peter also performs), Kafka was not an Eastern Jew and could never become one. He remained perpetually, self-consciously in between. Again and again he described himself as a Jew with animal metaphors, even those that were used by anti-Semites such as cockroaches and mice, to capture this state of being out of place. It is at once a curse and a refuge.

Yet Kafka’s stories are never straightforward satires or allegories. Red Peter’s capture and domestication can also be seen as a deeply ironic meditation on the slave trade between Africa and the New World (Red Peter comes from the “Gold Coast”) or, closer to home, on the European anthropologists and showmen who staged African village life for paying European audiences, complete with “authentic” African natives in appropriate costume. These “Voelkerschaus,” set up at trade exhibitions and fairs in Vienna, Berlin and Paris, gave Europeans the sensation of witnessing the exotic otherness of real savages, whose few words of broken German or French brought them nearer to civilization even as they confirmed their sub-human

status. In Kafka's first novel, set in a futuristic America, the hero changes his name to "Negro."

**K**afka's Red Peter speaks his captors' language perfectly of course, and he has a flair for figurative speech and ironic tone that he almost, but not quite, controls. His dilemma is to have achieved the education level of an "average European" while remaining stuck in an ape's body—an excruciating, marginalizing condition of in-between-ness that characterizes Kafka's greatest animal protagonists, from Gregor Samsa to the unnamed, mole-like creature in "The Burrow" or Josephine the singing mouse in his very last story. And like many of these animal riddles, "Report for an Academy" is merciless in depicting what it means to be human. Consider the transformative moment when Red Peter learns to speak, which begins when he picks up a bottle of schnapps, theatrically uncorks it and chugs down its contents in front of the sailors assembled around his cage, and then utters a jaunty "Hallo!" Never did the education level of an "average European" seem like such a pitiful accomplishment. But such is Red Peter's entry into the exalted ranks of the speaking human. The irony of using the civilized European, whose 'animal' instincts are unleashed by alcohol, as the model for an ape's elevation into human status, is profound and without end, like the distorted images in a hall of mirrors.

But perhaps we don't need to understand "Report for an Academy" as an allegory of anything at all. Perhaps Kafka simply wants us to think about the category of the human through this no-longer animal and not-quite human protagonist. But here again we come up with a riddle rather than an answer. For one of the striking things about this story is that there are no pure animals with which to measure Red Peter's accomplishments. His own animal condition lies behind the rifle shot that wounded him and the language he has learned to speak in order to survive, a vanished utopia to which he can never return. The

half-trained female chimpanzee with which Red Peter entertains himself in the evening is no closer to pure animality for being less well educated; indeed, he

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recognizes the broken, crazed look in her eyes all too well. Nor do we ever see a "pure," civilized human. The hunters and sailors who bring Red Peter in from the wild are themselves brutes, and the learned members of the academy who listen to his report never make an appearance. And so the question of genre—is it a story or a play?—turns out to be a philosophical statement about the performative nature of humanity itself. In Kafka's world we are always playing at being human, always caught in between.



MARK M. ANDERSON is the author or editor of two books about Kafka: *Kafka's Clothes: Ornament and Aestheticism in the Habsburg Fin de Siecle*, and *Reading Kafka: Prague, Politics and the Fin de Siecle*. He teaches German and Comparative Literature at Columbia University and writes widely on European literary modernism, German-Jewish culture, and contemporary German and Austrian literature.

# IN CONVERSATION WITH COLIN TEEVAN JAMES SHAPIRO

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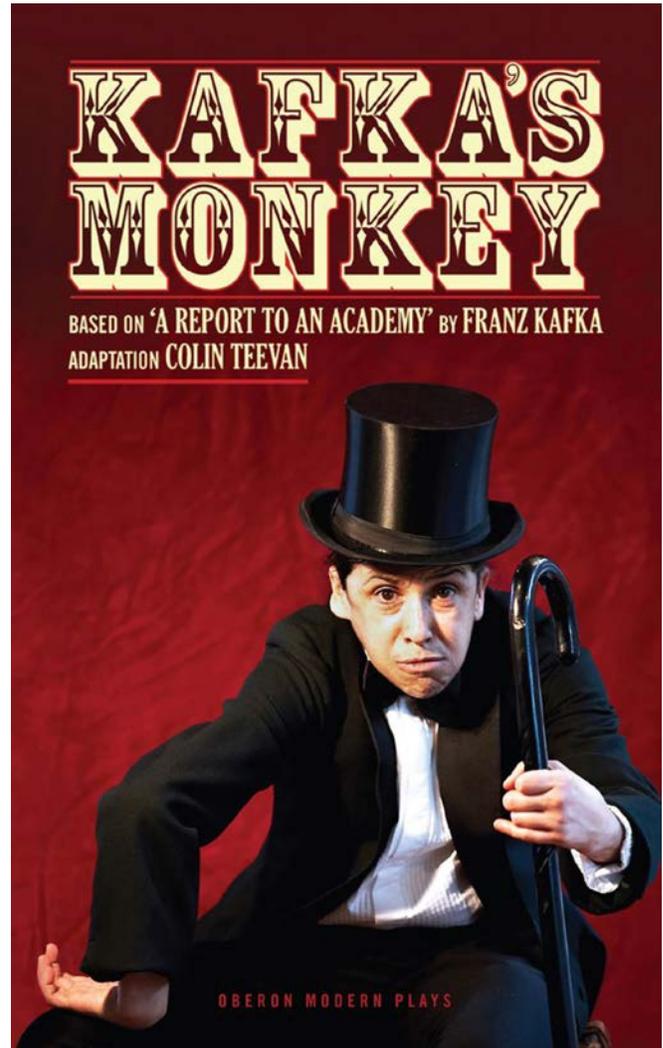
**T**his April, after the New York premiere of *Kafka's Monkey*, James Shapiro, Chair of Theatre for a New Audience's Council of Scholars, and Colin Teevan, the play's adaptor, sat down for a conversation about collaboration, adaptation and "scoring Kafka's text."

**SHAPIRO:** You began working on *Kafka's Monkey* a number of years ago, and I'm curious what first drew you to the project.

**TEEVAN:** I think there's one simple answer to the question, which is Kathryn Hunter. Walter Meierjohann [director of *Kafka's Monkey*] saw Kathryn in [Samuel Beckett's] "Rockaby," and said, "I know the exact script I want to do with her." They started looking at the script, and Kathryn asked Walter to bring me in as a writer because, as much as they loved the story, they couldn't actually make any translation of the work as text.

**SHAPIRO:** The story is a difficult text. I don't read German but even in the translations that I've read, it doesn't lend itself as easily as one might think to the stage, although it has its theatrical side. Can you talk a little bit about the greatest challenges in turning a story into a play, especially a one-person play?

**TEEVAN:** I suppose it feels like quite a dry read on the page, but one of the biggest challenges was, quite simply, in the opening line: "Esteemed members of the academy, you've done me a great honor of inviting me to give an account to my former life as an ape." What we were having trouble with was, 'where are we?' We're in the theater, but is our audience part of the show, or are we behind a brick wall? Who is the speaker? Because what Kafka doesn't have to do at any point is describe the speaker. We see it all from the speaker's point of view, so we don't actually see what he looks like, so what kind of monkey is speaking? Walter is a German director and—we joke but it's kind of



Cover, *Kafka's Monkey*, Based on "A Report to an Academy" by Franz Kafka, adapted by Colin Teevan; © 2009 Oberon Books; design by Mercy, cover photo of Kathryn Hunter as Red Peter, the ape, by Simon Annand.

true—that every German director has a concept. In Walter's case, we put a huge specimen box with a photograph that was a twenty-foot high blowup of one of the Hagenbeck gorillas. That dominates the set. So, I suppose we spent a long time on the concept. There's always a dynamic with the auditorium, even in a naturalistic play, that has to be negotiated, and it has to be at every level of production; it has to be in the design, the performance. We spent a long time on this because

this play speaks directly to an audience. I didn't write anything for a long time. I just watched as Kathryn did a lot of physical work and tried to perform as a monkey. I talked a lot to Walter. We spent a week away in Dresden where we actually just talked through what we wanted, and then I went away and wrote a script. I said, "I think it's going to be in verse." It's like I needed to unpack all of the Kafka, but I needed a motor.

I did a translation of the *Bacchae* with Peter Hall at the National Theatre in London. The composer on that, Mr. Harrison Birtwistle, is just one of the most astonishing people I've met, and he was astonishing to work with. He wouldn't let me change a word—and he didn't write any music. His theory was that all music is the division of time, so what he did was divide the time and had the musicians add layers. So *they* wrote the music. But it was so precisely timed that he turned my words into a piece of music.

I think all the best drama is in verse. There is a metrical structure to those texts. For instance, if you took a pause or a beat or a silence out of Beckett or Pinter, it collapses. The meaning is actually in the pacing. In one sense, what I needed to do was control the pace at which Kafka's thoughts and images and the monkey's journey was delivered. The reason it is a very hard text to read is because you just get assailed by too many images and too many thoughts. So, this metrical structure, I sort of feel like I scored Kafka's text using the verse form.

**SHAPIRO:** I had a chance to read the script, which reads like a beautiful poem as well as a story. It wasn't as distracting in certain ways as Kafka's story is as you're reading it. It had much more movement. As wonderful as it is to see Kathryn on stage, one of the great merits of the script is its very strong poetry. Could you talk a little bit about one of the most striking features—the rhythm—because Kathryn goes in and out of that iambic rhythm into a much more discombobulated rhythm.

**TEEVAN:** Well, I wanted to interrupt the verse to reflect the character. She's playing a chimpanzee. If you've ever observed chimpanzees, they turn on a six pence. But also, to use pace to control mood

and the seriousness—the speaker has in mind a very serious thing. The speaker is in quite a dangerous position in the sense that he's being held up as a specimen, so he has to flatter his audience and cajole them. So I used it much more in an articulate and flowing form. But when he gets to things like "no way out," which is definitely not iambic—the way it's written on the page is "No / Way / Out"—I always thought we should draw it as kind of stop sign.

There are other things, like where he says, "A light began to dawn on me." "Me" is at the end of the line, and I thought, is that what it's about? It's not. It's "A light / Began / To dawn / On me." So you are actually breaking that line into four. You give a sense of the experience of enlightenment. I wanted to draw a little light bulb around that on the actual printed page.

**SHAPIRO:** And it's not a crowded page. I also felt there's a space for irony. Kathryn didn't push in that direction, but I can imagine, in a decade, another actor coming to this role can work that in between the lines.

**TEEVAN:** I think the greatest twentieth-century development in theater writing is silence. If you look in Shakespeare's text, meaning resides in what people say. And possibly, in comedies like [Oscar] Wilde's, understatement is starting to take over. Once you start to get in Chekhov, Pinter said, "Everyone knows the truth and everyone is speaking to avoid it," and "The truth resides somewhere between what someone says and what his action is."

With *Red Peter*, it's quite often what he doesn't say. There's a very funny bit where, when the monkey is caught, he says, "And they shot at us," and Kathryn goes from a few pot shots into machine guns, "And they only hit one of us." So, it's like what is continuously underneath is a very vicious critique of humanity, but by just allowing him to say that and letting it sit, the audience starts to feel an undertow which he never articulates, because our *Red Peter* has to get out of that theater alive.

**SHAPIRO:** This is where I thought it was very

Irish, in the unspoken and in the way in which the comment is used to deliver the darkest message imaginable.

**TEEVAN:** I translate a lot from ancient Greek, but the ones I that I've loved the most have been Euripides—Euripides, I think, was the first Irish playwright. His plays are very dark, and yet there's a lot of humor in there.

**SHAPIRO:** Although you have one more layer of difficulty in this play, which is you're trying to recreate the experience of an ape, and apes, as you were saying earlier, turn on a dime and shoot back and forth. So the rhythms of your play quite remarkably allow for those rapid shifts that Kathryn is so brilliant at conveying.

**TEEVAN:** I think it's partly that, partly Kathryn, and me knowing my performer, as well. Knowing how far she can do a back bend or really push the physical stuff, I don't have to script that.

**SHAPIRO:** I'm used to talking to a lot of actors and directors and producers. I don't recall a collaboration that seems as perfect a melding of talents as I saw in this production—that's really impressive—in the sense that each one of you brings a different set of gifts that seem to lock into place when brought together.

**TEEVAN:** I've been part of fraught collaborations. This was completely unfringed because we didn't dwell upon demarcated lines and go, "I'm the writer. I decide this." "I'm the director. I decide this." It was continual collaboration so there are never "decisions" being made. I think this is probably Walter's great strength and his great maturity as a director.

**SHAPIRO:** You have a score of productions and plays behind you, I'm curious as to how you see Kafka's *Monkey* fitting into the trajectory of work that you've done.

**TEEVAN:** It's strange, I feel that on one level there appears to be three different strands to what I do: I engage with the classics, re-imagining the classics

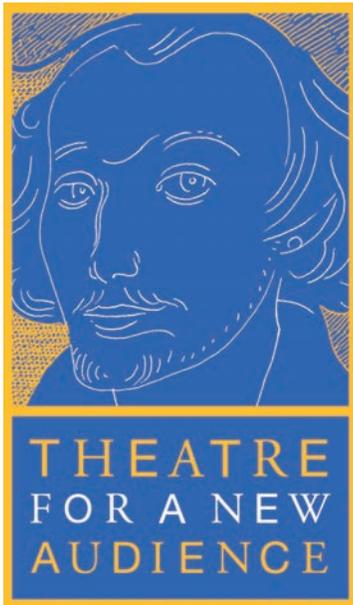
and the contemporary. There is also the work of the contemporary political drama that I write, plays about Iraq, Afghanistan, and Iran. Thirdly, there is the work I've written about Ireland and my own history, which, to a certain extent, they all tie together because the plays that concern me, the classical plays or the classical stories— whether it's Kafka or *Don Quixote*—I think you can probably see a pattern in the kind of characters I have.

The classics are part of me—part of not only my upbringing but also part of who we are as a society, so I think you cannot not engage with the classics—you cannot, as a writer, not read them because that's actually where our whole language comes from.



*JAMES SHAPIRO is the author of Rival Playwrights (1991), Shakespeare and the Jews (1996), Oberammergau (2000), 1599: A Year in the Life of William Shakespeare (2005), and most recently, Contested Will: Who Wrote Shakespeare (2010). He is currently at work on The Year of Lear: Shakespeare in 1606 and a Library of America volume, Shakespeare in America. His journalism has appeared in the New York Times, the Guardian, The London Review of Books, the TLS, and the Financial Times. He has been awarded fellowships from the NEH, the Guggenheim Foundation, and The New York Public Library Cullman Center for Scholars and Writers. He serves on the Board of Governors of the Folger Shakespeare Library as well as the Advisory Council for the Authors Guild and was recently elected to the American Academy of Arts & Sciences. He is currently Larry Miller Professor of English and Comparative Literature at Columbia University, where he has taught since 1985.*

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Founded in 1979 by Jeffrey Horowitz, the mission of Theatre for a New Audience is to develop and vitalize the performance and study of Shakespeare and classic drama. Theatre for a New Audience produces for audiences Off-Broadway and has also toured nationally, internationally and to Broadway. We are guided in our work by five core values: a reverence for language, a spirit of adventure, a commitment to diversity, a dedication to learning, and a spirit of service. These values inform what we do with artists, how we interact with audiences, and how we manage our organization.

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Theatre for a New Audience is an award winning company recognized for artistic excellence. Our education programs introduce students to Shakespeare and other classics with the same artistic integrity that we apply to our productions. Through our unique and exciting methodology, students engage in hands-on learning that involves all aspects of literacy set in the context of theatre education. Our residencies are structured to address City and State Learning Standards both in English Language Arts and the Arts, the New York City DOE's Curriculum Blueprint for Teaching and Learning in Theater, and the Common Core Learning Standards for English Language Arts. Begun in 1984, our programs have served over 124,000 students, ages 9 through 18, in New York City Public Schools city-wide.

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After over 30 years of being an itinerant theatre, Theatre for a New Audience is nearing completion on its first home in the Downtown Brooklyn Cultural District. Scheduled to open in fall 2013, our new home will be a place to gather, learn and explore. In it, we will be able to expand our education and humanities programs to include activities on weekends, after-school and during school vacations for students; as well as lectures, seminars, workshops, and other activities for artists, scholars, adults and families.

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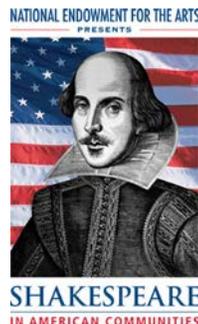
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