

Kafka tribute scores a hit — and a miss

REVIEW: Only one of a Santa Ana troupe's adaptations works.

By ERIC MARCHESE
Special to the Register

That upstart young theater company The Hunger Artists owes a lot to Franz Kafka. The group's name is derived from one of Kafka's most moving short stories, "The Hunger Artist," so, annually, the Santa Ana troupe puts on a Kafka show.

This time around, original adaptations of two Kafka short stories mark the 75th anniversary of the author's death.

In "Red Peter," Tom Hensley's adaptation of Kafka's "A Report to the Academy," a reporter obtains a long-sought-after interview with Red Peter, an ape who has learned to speak and

'Red Peter' 'In the Penal Colony'

- ▶ **What:** The Hunger Artists present original adaptations of two stories by Franz Kafka
- ▶ **Where:** 204 E. Fourth St., Suite I, Santa Ana
- ▶ **Continues:** Through March 21, 8:30 p.m. Thursday-Saturday, 7:30 p.m. Sunday
- ▶ **How much:** \$12
- ▶ **Ticket availability:** Good
- ▶ **Length:** About two hours
- ▶ **Suitability:** All ages
- ▶ **Call:** (714) 547-9100

has become part of human civilization.

The reclusive Red Peter (Mark Palkoner) lives in Germany, dealing with the outside world through his swishy manager (Mark Coyan). As he admits to the reporter (Kimberly Fisher), he's "averse to all humans" — even after spending five years among them.

Red Peter recounts his captivity aboard ship, scenes re-created in Shannon C. M. Flynn's staging.

Joseph, an amiable sailor (Coyan again) shows sympathy toward the caged animal, offering him water and friendship. Soon, the increasingly sentient ape utters his first words in a masterfully staged scene.

The ship's captain (Kelly Flynn) decides that if the ape speaks, it must be capable of thought and is thus, by definition, a man. He frees the ape, whom Joseph dubs 'Red Peter,' and begins to educate him, teaching him to reason.

One of the play's most touching moments occurs when the captain says to Red Peter, "Welcome to humanity."

But, as Kafka's story stresses, Red Peter can never be a part of humanity, just as he can never return to the life of an ape. He's trapped in a world he defines as offering "no answers," feeling like "a speck in an ocean" — Kafka's existential description of the human condition.

Palkoner is soft-spoken, thoughtful and only subtly menacing as the transformed ape, delivering a moving, economical performance.

Robbin Broad's sound design emphasizes the seagoing ship's loud, insistent creaking, and Melissa Petro's abstract set, all red, black and white cracks and fissures and silvery ducts, lends itself well to both stories.



DEBUNKING HISTORY: Captain Debunk (Kelly Flynn) philosophizes in 'In the Penal Colony.'

The program explains that the second show is Adam Martin's adaptation of Kafka's "In the Penal Colony," combined with concepts from several other Kafka stories. The result, also directed by Flynn, is an intellectually murky mess.

This intriguing but ultimately unsatisfying staging, superficially akin to science fiction, opens with a perplexed, perpetually amnesiac soldier (Coyan) sent by the god Janus (Fisher) to retrieve a POW (Palkoner) who has escaped through what is presumably some sort of metaphysical portal.

The portal leads to an island penal colony populated by "colo-

nists" who don't seem to know why they're there.

These prisoners are referred to as "patients" by a being known as "the Designer," who uses a device called an apparatus to inflict a gruesome, tortuous surgery upon them, carving what they were sentenced for on their flesh.

The crimes the various prisoners are accused of are humanity's flaws and failings. The soldier's inscription is a bloody "F," for "fate."

"In the Penal Colony" is populated with a garrulous pitchman named Prattle Glamway (Timothy Todd) and his talkative girlfriend, Miss Attic (Darcy Blake-

sley), who has very little upstairs. At one point, Glamway and the soldier break into enacting a soap commercial, injecting the intense drama of "Penal Colony" with elements of genteel farce.

The program explains that both Kafka and Martin are concerned with "the forces that effect human spiritual development," but it's hard to glean that from this staging. Where one expects the cogent irony of "Red Peter" and other Kafka masterpieces, the Hunger Artists' vision of "In the Penal Colony" offers up empty literary and theatrical calories — and only a handful of that.

THE CRUCIBLE

Arthur Miller's 1953 play fictionalizes the Salem witch trials of 1692, during which (as Miller has it) several girls accuse an increasing number of apparently innocent townspeople of coveting with Satan. The play works as colonial history, but Miller drew from it a pointed indictment of Senator Joseph McCarthy's politically inflected witch-hunt of the early 1950s. This Cal State Fullerton revival scores as both history and polemic. Director Dan Kern's Salem is brimming with life and vitality, and his production is powerful, thought-provoking and richly detailed. Kudos also for Todd Caneby's strikingly inventive set and Tom Durante's excellent use of atmospheric lighting. The cast brings this work magnificently to life. Christopher Younggren plays John Proctor as a genuine though imperfect hero. His solid presence anchors the play. As witch-hunter Reverend Hale, Alessandro Trinca is equally impressive, morphing from a crusading, self-righteous preacher to a compassionate human being who first realizes the evil inflicted upon Salem in the name of God. Keri Hostetler's understated performance aptly portrays the dignified and reserved Elizabeth Proctor, and Emily Mitchell gives an entertaining and colorful performance as Paris' Barbados slave, Tituba. Vanessa Villalovos' Abigail unfortunately comes across as too weak for a person supposed to be a scheming, intelligent seductress capable of masterminding these fraudulent claims. (Carey Blackburn) *Cal State Fullerton's Little Theatre, 800 State College Blvd., Fullerton, (714) 278-3371. Thurs.-Sat., March 11-13, 8 p.m.; Sun., 5 p.m. \$6-\$8.*



The Crucible

DEFYING GRAVITY

"Obviously a major malfunction..." Those words, laconically spoken by an anonymous NASA flight controller as the image of a shattered shuttle spewed across the bright Florida sky on the morning of Jan. 28, 1986, have cracked into the American consciousness as one of the great understatements of the downside of the quest to break our

earthly bonds. Making the disaster especially poignant was the fact that one of the seven astronauts blown to bits that day was civilian Christa McAuliffe.

While others have found only tragedy and defeat in the 1986 crash of the *Challenger* space shuttle, *Defying Gravity* crafts a lyrical elegy to the irrepressible power of the human spirit. Playwright Jane Anderson is neither maudlin nor ghoulish—obvious pitfalls in the subject. Instead, she weaves together the stories of a teacher (based upon schoolteacher McAuliffe), a NASA mechanic, a retired couple launch-bound in their Winnebago, Claude Monet (yes, that Claude Monet) and others into a picaresque tapestry of hope and promise. Monet—who died some 60 years before *Challenger's* launch—is *Gravity's* spiritual guru. Anderson deftly interlaces the Impressionist's ruminations upon his famous series of Rouen Cathedral paintings with the McAuliffe character's teachings to her young class of man's efforts throughout history to build higher and higher houses of worship in an attempt to defy gravity and reach the heavens. In the wrong hands, Anderson's delicately balanced structure could easily come crashing down in ruins. Fortunately, director John Ferzacca understands both the weight and the weightlessness of this *Gravity* as he guides his capable cast through the twists and turns of the play's time-tripping form. Standouts include Jessica Seely as the daughter who alternates between child and young woman; Will Nada as the guilt-wracked NASA wrench jockey; and Gregory Ghica, whose affable Monet is key to transforming the plunging white plumes of a "major malfunction" into a soaring quest for communion with God. (Brook Stowe) *Orange Coast College's Drama Lab Theatre, 2701 Fairview Rd., Costa Mesa, (714) 432-5880. Wed.-Sat., 8 p.m.; Sun., 2 p.m. Through March 14. \$6-\$7.*

KAFKA (TWO PLAYS)

In their annual tribute to the man who inspired their company's name, the Hunger Artists pay dubious homage to Franz Kafka. It's neither the acting nor direction in question with this night of theater, but rather their manner of tribute. Don't go expecting faithful adaptations of the early 20th-century Czech writer's work. Only one of the two stage adaptations stays relatively true to the story on which it is based; the other shares the title of Kafka's



Defying Gravity

original but little else.

Playwright Tom Hensley's expansion of the monologue "A Report to an Academy" into the multicharacter "Red Peter" retains Kafka's spirit and many of his ideas. Mark L. Falkoner convincingly tackles the solemn figure of Red Peter, an ape that mimics human behavior—including language—in escape laboratory confinement only to find himself caught between two species. Even with extraneous characters—a mousy reporter, a flamboyant butler—the adaptation still questions what constitutes humanity and whether freedom accompanies it.

It's too bad playwright Adam Martin didn't look to Hensley for pointers. To say that that Martin uses Kafka's "In the Penal Colony" as a "jumping-off point" is an understatement. He transmogrifies Kafka's critique of the terrifying interconnection of technology, justice and capital punishment into what the program notes call a "cerebral consideration of the nature of thought." He should have first taken a cerebral look at the story he completely rewrote before personifying Kafka's dilapidated, intricate machine of torture and execution into the Roman god Janus to TV advertising doesn't make it more profound; the play just collapses into a befuddled mess—a far cry from its inspiration and a disappointing way to honor it. (Anna Barr) *Hunger Artists Theatre, 204 E. 4th St., Ste. 1, Santa Ana, (714) 547-9100. Thurs.-Sat., 8:30 p.m.; Sun., 7:30 p.m. Through March 21. \$10-\$12.*

We recommend: *Blue Room; The Crucible; Defying Gravity; Headcheese; Pippin.*

• **TITANIC TRAGEDY AND TRIAL** Pat Cook wrote this dramatic version of a ship that sinks and kills lots and lots of people. *Irvine Adult School at University High School, 4771 Campus Dr., Irvine, (949) 936-7454. Opens Sat. Sat., 1:30 & 8:30 p.m.; Sun., 1:30 p.m. \$7-\$9.*

CLOSING WEEKEND

- **ASSASSINS** Stephen Sondheim contributed the music and lyrics for this rather unusual subject for a musical: "the surreal dissection of political assassination in America." *Fullerton College's Campus Theatre, Lemon St. & Chapman Ave., Fullerton, (714) 992-7433. Thurs.-Sat., March 11-13, 8 p.m.; Thurs., March 18, 8 p.m. \$11-\$12.*
- **THE CRUCIBLE** See New Theater Reviews. *Cal State Fullerton's Little Theatre, 800 State College Blvd., Fullerton, (714) 278-3371. Thurs.-Sat., March 11-13, 8 p.m.; Sun., 5 p.m. \$6-\$8.*
- **DEFYING GRAVITY** See New Theater Reviews. *Orange Coast College's Drama Lab Theatre, 2701 Fairview Rd., Costa Mesa, (714) 432-5880. Thurs.-Sat., March 11-13, 8 p.m.; Sun., 2 p.m. \$6-\$7.*
- **PIPPIN** This Prism Productions offering is short on the smoke and mirrors usually associated with a show that talks so much about magic and fantasy. But instead of diluting what little substance there is in the tale, the relatively minimalist production shows the play to be a quite earnest and even charming musical. *Curtis Theatre, 1 Civic Center Circle, Brea, (714) 990-7722. Thurs.-Sat., March 11-13, 8 p.m.; Sun., 2 p.m. \$10-\$20.*

ONGOING SHOWS

- **ALBEE'S PEOPLE** The gimmick here is that half of the performances feature males from the works of Edward Albee and the other half feature women. In other words, you've gotta pay twice to see the whole thing. *Old Globe Theatre's Cassius Carter Stage, Old Globe Theatre, Balboa Park, San Diego, (619) 239-2255. Tues.-Fri., 8 p.m.; Sat., 2 & 8 p.m.; Sun., 2 & 7 p.m. Thru March 21. \$23-\$39.*
- **AUNTIE MAME** Reviewer Dave Barton claims he fell asleep during this production, but everyone who surrounded him clapped like it was the best three hours they'd ever spent. So who's right? You be the judge. *Theatre District, behind the Lab, 2930 Bristol St., Costa Mesa, (714) 435-4043. Fri.-Sat., 8 p.m.; Sun., 2 p.m. Thru March 27. \$15-\$20.*
- **BLUE WINDOW** Craig Lucas made his name with *Prelude With a Kiss*, and while it's a good play, it also overshadows the rest of his work. For instance, this one: a comedy about a woman named Libby who invites six people to a cocktail party, some of whom she knows very well, and others she doesn't know at all. *Vanguard Theatre Ensemble, 699A S. State College Blvd., Fullerton, (714) 526-8007. Thurs.-Sat., 8 p.m.; Sun., 5 p.m. Thru April 3. \$15-\$19, student and senior discounts are available.*
- **BRIGHTON BEACH MEMOIRS** A nostalgic remembrance of Neil Simon's formative years as a Brooklyn teenager. *Long Beach Playhouse's Studio Theatre, 5021 E. Anaheim St., Long Beach, (562) 494-1014. Fri.-Sat., 8 p.m.; Sun., 2 p.m. Thru March 27. \$12-\$15.*
- **COUNTRY! THE MUSICAL** This isn't really opening week for this show, but we've held off placing it our listings

- because we don't be responsible for the stampede of people who'll soon be storming the walls of the Crazy Horse. But we can hold off no longer. Set in a fictional barbecue supper club in Bakersfield, this Pete Wilke-written show features 18 original songs and a six-member cast. *Crazy Horse Steak House and Saloon, 1580 Brookhollow Dr., Santa Ana, (714) 549-1512. Sat., 4 p.m. Indefinite run. \$15.*
- **FLOYD COLLINS** Musical based on the story of Floyd Collins, a cave explorer whose subterranean entrapment generated the first media sensation of the century. *Old Globe Theatre, Balboa Park, San Diego, (619) 239-2255. Tues.-Fri., 8 p.m.; Sat., 2 & 8 p.m.; Sun., 2 & 7 p.m. Thru March 21. \$23-\$39.*
- **HEADCHEESE** Though some of the 28 sketches—all written by local writers—seem like sitting ducks (Bill Clinton's sex life, nightmare blind dates) the sheer audacity

- of the show makes for an entertaining night and something staid Orange County can really use: a good, swift kick in the ass. (John McElligott Jr.) *Stages, 1188 N. Fountain Way, Anaheim, (714) 630-3059. Fri.-Sat., 8 p.m.; Sun., 7 p.m. Thru March 21. \$10.*
- **HELLO DOLLY!** Goodbye. *Musical Theatre West at the La Mirada Theatre for the Performing Arts, 14900 La Mirada Blvd., (714) 521-4849. Thurs.-Sat., 8 p.m.; Sun., 2:30 p.m. Thru March 21. \$20-\$35.*
- **IRONY OF AN UNCROWNED PRINCE** This contemporary comedy/drama about an actor who puts his career before everything else in his life stars R.A. Blankenship, who also co-wrote the play with director Kevin Dame. *Ensemble Theatre, 844 E. Lincoln Ave., Ste. E, Orange, (949) 263-4170. Fri.-Sat., 8 p.m. Thru March 20. \$18-\$20.*

- **KAFKA (TWO PLAYS)** See New Theater Reviews. *Hunger Artists Theatre, 204 E. 4th St., Ste. 1, Santa Ana, (714) 547-9100. Thurs.-Sat., 8:30 p.m.; Sun., 7:30 p.m. Thru March 21. \$10-\$12.*
- **KVETCH** Steven Berkoff's comedy was a bit hit in the '80s. Check this one out to see if it's really that funny. It's a production of the Los Angeles Jewish Theatre (which is actually based in Long Beach, but who are we to nitpick?). *Actors' Playhouse, 1409 E. 4th St., Long Beach, (562) 590-9396. Sat., 4 & 8 p.m.; Sun., 2 p.m. Thru April 11. \$12-\$16.*
- **MAN OF LA MANCHA** See Theater feature. *Huntington Beach Playhouse, 7111 Talbert Ave., Huntington Beach, (714) 375-0696. Thurs.-Sat., 8 p.m.; Sun., 2 p.m. Thru March 28. \$11-\$15; \$5 student prices Thurs.*
- **OF MICE AND MEN** It's the lack of emotional warmth that makes this a curiously empty affair. Given SCR's formi-

THEATRE MARQUEE

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Sense of Humor Elevates 2 Plays Inspired by Kafka

Theater Review

By T.H. McCULLOH
SPECIAL TO THE TIMES

The theme that connects most of Franz Kafka's work is man as prisoner, either of himself or of society. Two world-premiere plays at Hunger Artists Theatre are "inspired" by Kafka stories: The first presents a sensitive, intelligent man as prisoner of his own genealogy, the second a man in the chains of a system that insists on dictating his future.

Both, written by members of the Hunger Artists group, are inventive and diverting and imaginatively staged. They often find delicacy, which is unusual in Kafka's hard world, and a great deal of humor, which is even rarer.

The shorter, opening play is "Red Peter," based on the story "Report to an Academy" and adapted by Tom Hensley. It concerns a vaudeville star who, it turns out, is an African ape, and a very advanced one at that.

On the ship that brought Red Peter to Europe, the ape learned to talk and began developing his mental prowess. By the time reporter Francine Whitley visits Red Peter at his palatial villa, he has become a vaudeville star and is willing to recount for her the story of his capture and evolution, which is the play proper.

The play speaks sympathetically to the outsider, the unusual soul who fits nowhere, adrift between two worlds.

Mark L. Palkoner is an impressive Red Peter, gentle, yet hiding great power behind his mild exterior, and tortured by his fate. Mark Coyan is funny as Red Peter's homosexual butler, Herr Buse-neau, and as naive sailor Joseph. Kimberly M. Fisher is the solid reporter, and Timothy C. Todd and Kelly A. Flynn are both good as the ship's ensign and captain, respectively.

The more interesting play is "In the Penal Colony," adapted by Adam Martin. Although some of the imagery is foggy, the central

figures are unerringly drawn in the script.

The Soldier (Coyan) seems to vaguely remember being in a concentration camp and suffering other wartime traumas; he is even more vague in his knowledge of where he is now, a nightmarish compound filled with danger and good times.

Captain Debunk (Kelly Flynn), a con man who is more than he appears, takes the Soldier under his wing. Debunk takes Soldier to a party, where he is introduced to Prattle Glamway (Todd) and his mistress, Miss Attic (Darcy Blakesley).

There also are Janus (Fisher), much concerned about gateways and which ones the Soldier is allowed to pass through, the Designer (Jami McCoy) and an insane POW (Palkoner).

Coyan's Soldier, Todd's Glamway and Blakesley's hilarious Miss Attic are vivid portraits, but the highlight here is Flynn's Captain Debunk, a comic invention that is subtle and totally effective.

Both plays are directed by Shannon C.M. Flynn with intensity, detail, fine pacing and a monumental sense of humor.

• "In the Penal Colony" and "Red Peter," Hunger Artists Theatre, 204 E. 4th St., Santa Ana. 8:30 p.m. today-Saturday, 7:30 p.m. Sunday. \$10-\$12. Ends March 21. (714) 547-9100. Running time: 2 hours.

"Red Peter"

Mark Coyan..... Herr Buseneau/Joseph
Kimberly M. Fisher..... Francine Whitley
Mark L. Palkoner..... Red Peter
Timothy C. Todd..... Ensign Miller
Kelly A. Flynn..... Captain Haggbeck
"In the Penal Colony"

Mark Coyan..... The Soldier
Kimberly M. Fisher..... Janus
Kelly A. Flynn..... Captain Debunk
Darcy Blakesley..... Miss Attic
Timothy C. Todd..... Prattle Glamway
Jami McCoy..... The Designer
Mark L. Palkoner..... POW

A Hunger Artists world premiere production of two adaptations of Franz Kafka short stories, by Tom Hensley ("Red Peter") and Adam Martin ("In the Penal Colony"). Directed by Shannon C.M. Flynn. Scenic design: Melissa Petro. Lighting design: Lonnie R. Alcaraz. Sound design: Robbin E. Broad. Stage manager: Rebecca Green.