

Tony, Wes, Ed, thank you very much for being here to talk about these two amazing productions that are kind of either based on or approach or approximate Kafka's story report for an academy.

I want to start with Origins. Tony, I know you've been touring this for pretty much a decade, I think it is now. What brought you to Kafka's story originally?

Well, really the simple answer is the director, Phala Phala, brought me to Kafka's story.

Paala was thinking about Kafka towards his final master's piece, and he approached me. He gave me the short story, he said, "Have a read." I took it home, I read it, I came back and he said, "What do you think?" I said, "It's a lovely story." He said, "I want you to perform it." And I said, "There ain't no way I can perform something like this." And then he just kept on pestering me, and I finally agreed, and we engaged the process and we unpacked the work and we arrived at a performance of the work that's just grown over the years preceding that.

What stage did Kafka come into what you were doing? Because it's not quite the same thing, it's not a kind of version of the story. Where did Kafka arrive in that? It was later.

Similar to Tony, actually, it was the director. I've been working on this show with two directors, my mate Tom Parry, who's a comedian and writer, a very brilliant comedian and writer, and Wes, who's been the dramaturg on the show, who's a very brilliant director and of course an academic.

I sort of had the idea, because I wanted to do something that starts out like a conventional stand-up show, and then three quarters of the way through goes a bit strange, and to see if a more comedy audience would go with that.

Yeah, and I was telling Tom about the idea, and he said, "Oh, there's a Kafka story that's kind of that in reverse, that you should read," and he gave it to me to read, and I read it, and I thought, "Oh, this is great." And I didn't know that one, actually. I knew some other, I knew like Metamorphosis and the sort of famous ones, but I didn't know that one at all, and I read it and thought, "Oh, yeah, that's interesting." And I spoke to Wes about it, and he knew it, obviously, of course. And so it sort of, I guess it influenced it in the writing, in the kind of ending, the kind of tribunal scene, and all that is probably more close to the Kafka story than the stuff early on, do you know what I mean?

And also, I mean, there's tribunals elsewhere in Kafka as well, of course. So, I mean, Kafkaesque is a much overused term, but I think it's actually right for this show as opposed to yours, if you like, in that Kafka's kind of in the air, but it's not an adaptation. No. It's not a demonstration. Yeah, yeah. It's not a, you know, it's in the air rather than necessarily in the genes, if you like.

It wasn't there at the beginning. We came to Kafka, as Ed says, along with a whole bunch of other stuff, obviously.

So there's a different relationship to the original, as you said. And I mean, talking both as one of Maker's balls as a punter, I love that difference. I think that the double bill really is really interesting in the way that both shows reflect on each other, if you're a member of the audience, in ways that you guys knew nothing about, of course. Because, you know, they were made in completely different parts of the world with different objectives. But you put them together and you suddenly see, "Ah, you know, that's also Kafkaesque, but it's also something else." Well, that was your brilliant sort of idea, Wes, wasn't it, to bring them together? It's when I saw Tony's stuff, or when, well, you suggested bringing Tony here, and then I went and had a look, that really would work with Ed's show, because there's totally different approaches to a similar set of questions.

I want to talk about the evolution of the text, but you saying that has really made me think about also that the performance is intrinsically in Kafka. I mean, he's standing there, isn't he, reporting? He's in front of an audience. And it's a life story, which is the basis of all stand-up comedy, kind of, isn't it? And you both, like performances built into both of them, especially with all that. I mean, we've got the kind of the apes, the performing apes, we've got music, we've got a kind of reflection on theatre. So is it, I mean, were you aware of that kind of meta level when you were doing it, that it was a reflection on the business of stand-up? Yeah, I mean, you're sort of always aware of that a bit, I think, but you don't want it to be, you want all that stuff to be a bit kind of invisible, really. So it's there if people want to look for it, but at the same time, you want people to just be able to enjoy it as a, you know, mine's very silly. It's very throwaway as a show. It's just, you know, it's a stand-up comedy show that

we kind of make ourselves, sometimes we call it the Simpsons rule, whereby, you know, it has to work on its own terms. And then if you realize, oh, that's a version of The Odyssey, or that's a version of Scarface, or, you know, there's some intertext that it's working with, then there's another level, but it has to work on its own terms. It can't be that, oh, this makes sense because it's a version of that, because that's something that's always how you work.

And again, I think in this show last night, somebody came in to me at the end and said, you know, that was amazing, a whole load of cultural references there. I knew I wasn't getting because of the people around me were, but I still loved it. So that's, you know, that's what you want, really.

Yeah. Is that fair? Yeah, I'm sorry. It's funny that you'd say that because for me, the work over the years has been to find the sillier and to break the denseness of the text, because it's very easy to be consumed by the quality of the text, which lends itself to the academy, and it lends itself to kind of, you know, Thai and, you know, white. There's no looseness in it. And so for me, the game has always been is how do you humanize and dignify the ape in ways that are relatable. And that's really about the little things that have nothing to do with the academy that are just about how do I resonate with another being that has a pulse. Yeah. And so my tool or my device with that was finding the simple calm in the air. So in within the denseness and the, I guess, pain of the text is to really find the moments of lightness. So you let people breathe and you reel them back in so you can break their hearts again over and over in the duration of the text. That's that's that's the thing that I think Phala and I work for. We first we found how to tackle the text. But then that over a period of performing the show over a number of years started to layer the show in very interesting ways as well. And has it changed over the years since you've been performing? Massively, I think meaning comes to the show in every place that I go to. So the things that have shifted the meaning that have led the show. I mean, if I had to identify certain moments as there's a moment where he speaks about being in a cage with hands up pressed up against a great wall in the early years that used to be just a spoken bit. But after we went to perform in Oakland, California, where the Black Lives Matter movement was quite prominent and the idea of hands up was quite prominent. It became a kind of iconic moment in the play when the eight puts. Yeah, personalized. When we went to Australia and Chris and Adelaide, it had just been off the back of the Australian those wildfires that ravaged parts of Australia and the idea of the the

one of the patrons on the ship who would burn the egg on the back.

And the idea of hot hot hot kind of the kind of the manic reaction to the heat. That's the thing that only came in now in 2020 in Australia. So I always kind of challenge myself to find ways to resonate the here and the now with the show, which is why also the papers in each navy city I go to are important because it demonstrates that the ape is consuming the same knowledge. That the people in the same place are so they're little ways that we find and you kind of think about all the time to keep the show alive and exciting for themselves.

In a similar way, your show's troubled, hasn't it? For a couple years? I don't know when you're in my team.

I'm crazy.

Only in the UK. So quite a few gigs in Scott's who did Edinburgh last year, did two weeks in Edinburgh, done Mac first comedy festival in Wales, couple of times with it. And yes, just around the UK. But have those places or the things that have happened then also left their mark on the text and the show? Yeah, we did some disastrous previews in Devon that have made their way into this, or one in particular

a music incident here on Friday night in Oxford that may well make its way into the show. I wondered, I wondered, I hoped.

So, yeah, I mean, in a way it's all material, isn't it? Yeah, I mean, if you're, yeah, if you're, if you're, I don't want to speak for you, but if you're it, it's all material that can then be reused or not reused depending in a way that you're also talking about. I mean, and I mean, that moment that you mentioned with the heat was so powerful.

And it's amazing then I kind of think, oh, well, what was the show before that then? You know, because there's all these moments that accrete as the thing moves. Yeah, it's also a testimony to the director, Phala Phala, who's also, you know, who we've got a similar ethos around how it is a show arrives at the version that it needs to be.

And these are all things, these are all changes I make myself. And I end up talking to him with respect to him because, oh, that's interesting. He's not, you know, he's not precious about, you know, my show, you must run me through all of the changes, you know, he's, and also it's, it's, it's, it's, it's, it's a freedom that he's given to me that also has allowed the show to travel in the way that it does, because he doesn't travel with the show. I travel on my own, the bag, the show fits into two bags. And I travel all over the world. And I arrive and I move the show in and I plot it and I teach the operator in the venue and I hand over the show to them and we run the show. It's also allowed the show to be able to travel

to be able to live in the fringes in a way that it wouldn't have if we had stuck to kind of very strict ways of thinking about theater and touring it. And so that's a testimony to his kind of

vision, but also his trust in me as, as the custodian of the show in the way that we keep, we keep developing and traveling.

I mean, the shows as solo shows, both of them also seem to me to have a kind of another similarity, which is that they both keep returning to the same point in them. There's another kind of layering, not simply of the sort of the evolution of the shows, but the show itself kind of keeps returning to the same point. And I don't know whether it's a facet of solo shows, but it's also a facet of the Kafka text, of course. I mean, Ed, you're the way it does it in your show seems to be through the music. Is that, is that right? Yeah, pretty much. Yeah. So it's funny with stand up because it's like you, if you're doing an hour, you sort of, it's almost like at the beginning you're sort of building two different shows because you're, you're trying out jokes and making like funny material.

And actually, I think what I said to me years ago when I was saying, I'm trying to write this thing, but like, I don't know how it will all connect up because the, you know, the subjects don't seem to be related or anything. And then you say, well, look, it's all coming out of your head. So at some point they will all meet up. It's all the stuff you're thinking about. And he's absolutely right. So on the one hand, you're sort of building jokes and, you know, comic routines. And then I knew there was this story that I wanted to do this story about this guy who looks like me and has my name and has some of the same experience as me and then finds out that he's not, you know, an entire human.

And then I have to sort of prove that he is or isn't. And so I was trying to think about how to keep that bubbling while doing the sort of, you know, a stand up comedy show. And it was actually well, Adam's Dell said to me that man is brilliant comedian writer. Will said to me, it should be like you're trying to tell them the story of the strange trick to the doctor that you keep interrupting yourself. And I'll before we get to that, I've got to tell you this. So I went to the doctor and I got these. Oh, no, I'm gonna look. I got to this first. You know what I mean? So that was the sort of thinking around that. And then it was like, well, how can we because, you know, the first couple of times I did it with that structure in mind, I just did that. And of course, I mean, you can get away with that in a work in progress. But it's a bit crass and it's a bit on the nail and it gets a bit like annoying for an audience. If you keep going, oh, I'm not going to tell you that. I'll tell you this now. So then, you know, some musician as well. And I knew I wanted to show to have music in it. So I just thought, how would you do that musically?

And so I wrote this little theme that was based on it was a kid's cartoon called Mr. Ben Children. I remember it. We're over generation. I think it was a UK children's cartoon in the 70s. Maybe it started in the 60s. I'm not sure why I was aware of it in the 1970s. A very little kid.

And it always had these amazing soundtracks. And who did the music? Mr. Ben was going to Duncan Lamont, who's this amazing jazz British jazz musician who played with like everyone on campus and everyone based sort of day job was writing music for telly. And he did a lot of what they call library music, you know, which is stuff for films and telly and radio.

And I always love Mr. Ben and there's something about this show that kind of reminded me of that. And there's a great episode where he goes to sort of things like Victorian times and he gets involved in a balloon race and there's a brilliant little theme for the balloon race by Duncan Lamont.

just always loved that. And so it's sort of the waiting room kind of hold music is kind of based on that. So I set it. Can we hear the waiting room music? You've sold it so well.

is just a C major seventh chord,

and then a C minor seventh chord,

and you look at that, and then the melody sits on top, and it's just a little question and answer thing that goes.

(Guitar Music)

(Guitar Music)

So that's the waiting room theme, so I sort of introduced the idea of being in the waiting room over that,

And then I stop it and I get carried away and talk about other things. And then whenever I want to go back to the waiting room,

room,

bring that back in, and then we're back in the waiting room, and then, yeah, and at some point it gets

other little layers of things on top of it, but yeah,

So it was sort of, yeah, apologies to these types of Duncan Lamont.

We make no money on this show. No money. I don't need nothing.

Brilliant. Yeah. So it was kind of inspired by Mr. Ben, I suppose. Fantastic. And for you, Tony, there's that moment when Red Peter sort of reaches up to the, what's it called, the lectern and kind of stands up and re- and sort of hauls himself up and resets as it were. I mean, do you think of it in similar ways? Yeah, I mean, the idea was always this question around straddling the line between human and animal.

And I guess it's a thing that we, that's kind of a physical moment of returning to what it is that he's come here to do.

But it's also, it's a line that he walks, you know, from the moment he walks on. I mean, the idea, you know, with the physicality, for example, is that the feet never touch the ground like a human being. So you spend the duration of the show kind of hovering above the stage in terms of how it is that he walks and he navigates himself. I've actually never thought of kind of that mounting of the lectern as a reset. It's a very interesting idea. And I think it's very true. I think it's one of those things that Phalla, as a director from the outside, looks and textures in. But the whole idea around that was that this is, you know, we need to remember that this is half ape, half man. And it wouldn't be as easy as just walking to a lectern and just speaking. There's got to be something about the way in which he arrives at the lectern that activates people to understand that this is a moment worth looking forward to hearing what he has to say. And so the fact that it happens multiple times also gave me the, you know, as a performer, the pleasure of finding the variation in the different mountains. Is this one fatigued? You know, there's one way he has a bottle in his hand. How do you handle that? And the very last one is very, very simple. It is kind of the ape showing you its more human side after showing you its most ape-ness.

And I think those are kind of the brilliant subtext and layers that we found in the work that I think resonate in different ways.

I mean, Kafka uses animals throughout his stories really to ask what it is to be human.

And certainly people like J.M. Kudsey, you know, have taken Kafka's story to be a kind of defense of the more than human. And I think in a way both of your shows do that too, don't they? I mean, there's even a kind of dignity, even sublimity, really. But Ed, you've got that wonderful music coming in. Again, different kind of music of the more than human. I mean, is that how important to you is that as a kind of I don't want to say a message of the show that would be too crass, but as something that is really driving the show?

for me, it's kind of a descent into the real raw nature of the animal.

I think that's the really the very difficult thing about the show, if I have to identify anything, is how I as a human being, as a black man in contemporary world, allow myself to fully descend and embrace the animal,

despite ideas around signification and kind of the degradation of the black body in relation to the ape.

How my job is to put that aside and to really dedicate my psyche, my emotional world, internal emotional world, and my physicality to inhabiting this being without judgment or prejudice or fear.

And trust that that process or emerging from that process on the other end will have shifted an idea, a perception, a relation to the way in which we create meaning and imaging.

It's very difficult for me and it requires a ritual at the beginning of the show and it requires a kind of an exorcism of it from my body at the end of the show.



But we very quickly understood the burden of what it means to play an ape as a black body, but we also understood the power of it as a way to subjugate the way in which that imaging and the power of that imaging is made relevant.

And that could have only ever happened through fully embracing and not being afraid to find the animal within me.

I mean, the early versions of the show had very fancy things like we actually made an actual scar. We were thinking about how to give the ape more fur. And Phala just stood for a moment and he said, "But it doesn't need any of that."

But it needs its complete dedication to the character, complete dedication to the physical and emotional world of the character. And trust that when you do that, when you walk onto the stage, what people will see will be the furthest thing from human.

But they will also be challenged with how human it is. So that was kind of the interesting journey that we took with that. But it is a thing that takes so much from me and it is a thing that requires a very set routine around how I enter and how I yank myself out of it.

So yeah, the yanking is a kind of a physical exorcism and it puts the audience also in an awkward situation where they're not sure if it's the end of the show or if they should clap. But it's a thing that needs to happen. It's a thing that I need to leave here and not take with me wherever I go because I think that would be too cumbersome on me as an individual.

I'm interested in, I mean I think I was really eloquent, I can't of what's involved here. And I think most of the stress in what you were just talking about was the visual aspects of your black body embodying the ape there. I think there's also really, really powerful, phonic sound script to this show which accompanies the visual because the ways you do, I mean I confess before this show I'm kind of allergic to people doing ape acting because it's like what are you doing? Really? You are not doing ape acting. You're doing something entirely different as an embodiment.

Partly in the noises, in the grunts, in the, you know, it's visual but there's an incredible sound thing going on there.

But it's not really a question. I think it's part of what you're doing though. That's testimony to another individual that's been very influential on the show. Her name is Ligetso "Dee" Morrotto. She's a sound practitioner.

And she at some stage helped us out at the Grahamstown Arts Festival. She came in as a stage manager because Phala fell ill and couldn't travel with the show. But because of her sound experience and because of her love for the show and for me, she saw the potential in expanding the sonic world of the show. And so those are really things that came in I think around draft three, four of the show where she said, "I see what you're doing and I feel what you're doing. I don't hear it." And so the work of the years preceding that was to how do I create the soundscape of the world? And of course that starts before you see the ape in the wings.

And it's kind of a weird switch over between the preset of the show, which was done, that was the first thing that was done for the show all those years ago. So you can hear that that ape is much younger and much lucid and much haphazard in the way that it delivers.

And then the ape that comes onto stage is a different layer of that. So it's a conversation also sonically about what the show has experienced over the years.

And I mean Dee is incredible at what she does and she's done incredible work with the show. And even when she comes to see the show, which she saw most recently last year, she still has notes. She's like, "Um, nah." She really is kind of my moonshot. I know with her she'll be always brutally honest about where this show is sitting for her, particularly sonically. She'll contribute to that. So it's a great testament to the work that she's done on the show.

Also, very much in the same vein as Phala, kind of give the show what it needs, but also don't suffocate the show. Yeah, don't layer it up with too much. So their game now, over the years, has been coming to see where the show is at.

"Oh, this is version 13.0. Okay, that's interesting that you found that." And we talk about it much as we are now over drink. And it leaves me with stuff to think about that I can play with the show to the next place where it's going. But that's a beautiful thing also.

We've got an aversion around really sitting with the work. We'd like this formula of four weeks, and then it has to do these incredible things.

I've had the benefit of sitting with the work for 13 years.

There's absolutely no way that that cannot be a benefit to the work.

Because everything that happens flows into the work. And that's been a great burden also because it makes me seem like I'm crazy. And I don't do other things, which is a complete lie. But also, it's an honor to be able to dissect a bit of work over such a long period of time and to keep getting the opportunity to do that.

And I think it's also a testimony to the way in which Kafka thought and dissected his story, story game, and how what he was writing still remains relevant to where we are today.

Can I

We could talk for a lot more, but I'm just going to ask you one more thing, because it's come up in both of what you've said, which is about aging and being old.

Which we all are. And I mean, the sort of medicalization and age is really central to your show.

But also, Tony, you talked a bit about the young ape who's back there, but the ape that's performing is an ape who's also looking back on his apedom. But also you as a performer looking back on your younger self doing this show. And I really, I was quite affected by age

Yeah, for me, it's about also about how long I've been doing the show.

People must do shows this long. Well, I think they must. The mouse drop.

Yeah, but it's not the same thing.

And the crisis came at kind of the midpoint of the 13 years when the body, I started to get bigger in size because the show would be a thing that we'd pick up and put down because we were targeting festivals around the world, fringe festivals, which is only really an opportunity we had to perform the show outside of South Africa. So in that period, this just appeared where my body changed. I couldn't do the same things that I could when I was younger and more fit and more agile. But the crisis was in the reaching for those things. And and Phala just said, well, you're aging and you're getting fat. Do you think animals don't go through the same process?

And I went, OK, so what is aging and getting fat mean for me as the performer, as the ape? And the thing that became interesting that I found is the joy in the process of reaching for things that you could do that you can no longer.

And there is an other thing that the ape also has and a frustration with himself around. There are things that I lose every day by virtue of being alive and being a being that moves through time and space, you know.

And how I play with that in the performances, they never really settled. He's always kind of off balance and always trying to reach for something that's kind of a discomfort in in himself that lives in the physicality. And that idea came from this idea of I'm I'm not the thing that I was and I'm trying to understand the thing that I am now, but I'm trying to understand it through reaching for the thing that I was. And there's an interesting game that happens there because it the only rule is that the feet cannot touch the ground because an ape's feet do not touch the ground in that way.

And you know, but my everything in my body is saying just put your damn feet down.

And the game the game in the show becomes how do I resist that? It's kind of it's kind of the you know, the mecca for me in the hour to see if I can reach that, you know. And I've managed to keep to keep holding that. But I think there's something also interesting in watching him struggle with that. And sometimes my posture is more human, but sometimes my you know, and then there's something in my body that says it and then you go you go back down to a more you know. And but that is also the struggle between the ape side of him and the human side of him. And this being that's trapped in an existence that's constantly been negotiated, you know, by others who are looking into him. And this so there is that. And then there's there's also the beautiful thing around touring the show for so long is that actual physical set also is aging. I was talking to Eloise who is a wonderful technician who's working with us here around how the backdrop of the show is frayed and is breaking. And it tells the story of the show that's touring. The bag of the ape has you know, it's held by pieces of duct tape. And there's a fragile sticker that they put on one of my flights that refuses to go. But it's also still there and it's frayed. You know, it tells there's something that happens. It's a combination of the show in transit that that that ultimately makes its way and culminates onto the stage and adds extra bits of meaning. And if you're sitting as an audience member and you're saying that you're going, oh, that's a fragile sticker. But of course, because he's an ape, but he still flies. You have to fly to get it. You know, there's all sorts of questions to start to ask yourself when I got up on the back bar for the first time, Wes and everyone in the venue were supremely worried that this thing is going to break. It's only ever broken once. And that was years ago in the early years. But the versions of the show now, we built the thing to look unstable because the being is unstable. And all of those things were together. Sorry, I can. No, no, it just adds to that feeling. It broke in a performance.

And and I somehow managed to do a Spider-Man flip and catch the bar. Oh, wow. And then I proceeded to beat the set for about two minutes and carried on with the show.

Those are the things in performance that you can never you can never predict the risks that we take and we live with.

Those things that we I mean, nowhere near as depth defined as that. But there's a in my show, there's a little pop quiz at the beginning or a play song by UK 80s, a band called The Smiths.

Some would have another measure or now. And I asked the audience what what very well known socially conscious uplifting soul and has the same chords, same homonid materialism. And no one's ever got it. It's very, very tricky.

It's almost a rhetorical question. And I was doing a preview for Edinburgh and I played it and I said, right. And I was about to just move on and go, I'll put your own misery. And this woman right down the front just went it's and said exactly what it was.

This has never happened. I said, who I had turned up. She's a woman called Fiona Bryce, who's a very well known orchestrator and arranger. And she's been working with Johnny Marr and taking those Smiths songs and putting them into like orchestras.

I still get your answers. So she was like, sorry, I've just been working on that all week.

she's the only person that's ever got out of that class.

Can I say one more thing, just about aging, because I think it's really, really interesting about, again, both shows.

One of the kind of things that Ed's show comes back to coming again is intergenerational contact. People talking to each other across generations. And I think that's part of the othering thing that we live with in our communities, in our groups, that different generations don't pass their stories onto each other as much as maybe they did in previous times.

And I think that's part of the, it's a strong part of your show within yourself in relation to your own early apeness, but it's also clearly a really strong part of the connection with the audience. And I think that's true in your show too. It just had never struck me before as quite a thing until the two shows that were together. And I thought, Anna, so much of this is about almost genetic learning or passing on learning from one generation through across various different other boundaries.

So that's me as a punter rather than anything else. Well, and you're both passing on a kind of story, an extraordinary story from someone who died a hundred years ago this year.

Tony, Wes, Ed, many thanks. Thank you. Thank you, Derek. It's been a pleasure.