

Once Again, Into the Woods: An Interview with Stephanie Barber

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Trial in the Woods explores rationality, violence, and the ethics of punishment through Barber's trademark humor and wordplay

- *October 22, 2021*
- *Words: Rahne Alexander*



Stephanie Barber is a tireless artist who has called Baltimore home for much of the past 20 years, and her work in film, music, writing, and performance has been consistently exciting and challenging. From feature films like *In the Jungle* (2017) and *DAREDEVILS* (2013) and music projects like Bobbie Donny and Ms. Money Money, to her near-daily social media haiku and her book exploring the phenomenon of social media engagement via the YouTube comments for Bob Seger’s “Night Moves,” Barber’s artwork provides profound and accessible investigations into the most consistent questions about human existence, particularly when it comes to the tensions between civilization and the “natural” world.

Barber's newest publication, *Trial in the Woods* (Plays Inverse, 2021) is a play originally commissioned by Baltimore artist Sarah Jacklin and first produced in June 2018 at Mercury Theater. As both a fable and a courtroom procedural, *Trial in the Woods* explores rationality, violence, and the ethics of punishment through Barber's trademark humor and wordplay.

The narrative centers on an act of extreme violence—Ovelia Otter murders Pennstin Wolf in the middle of an exercise class as a menagerie of onlookers try to make sense of the act. The subsequent trial, prosecuted by a lynx and defended by a squirrel before a boar judge, relies entirely on non-humans to wrestle with the question of why the murder happened and what to do about it—and the final result is much closer to Ionesco than *Law and Order*.

BmoreArt interviewed Barber over email about addressing violence, the fraught usage of animals as metaphors, shapeshifting concepts of “justice” and “community,” and more.



"Stephanie Barber's visionary latest, *Trial in the Woods*, is a philosophical and frequently hilarious dive into violence, blame, truth, communal responsibility, and the absurdity of our institutions. On the surface, this play concerns a crime and a trial, and moves with the deliciously swift pace of a courtroom procedural, but as the interrogations progress the animals at the center of the trial have much to reveal about the essence of human nature. I love the way Barber's work never does quite what I expect, always resists the familiar path, so I emerge from her worlds exhilarated and even changed."

LAURA VAN DEN BERG, AUTHOR OF  
I HOLD A WOLF BY THE EARS & THE THIRD HOTEL

"When a brutal murder takes place in broad daylight, how hard can it be to pursue justice? With that question, Stephanie Barber's *Trial in the Woods* takes me to a strange dream, where civic engagement becomes a carnival of death and the excitement of the crowd turns into a collective paralysis. At first it seems so odd how peacefully these wild animals live with each other—I can't help but wonder how much blood was shed to reach that social agreement. And now it's broken. How far and how deep will these talking animals go to examine the contract that they hold together?"

ZHU YI, AUTHOR OF  
ALIEN OF EXTRAORDINARY ABILITY

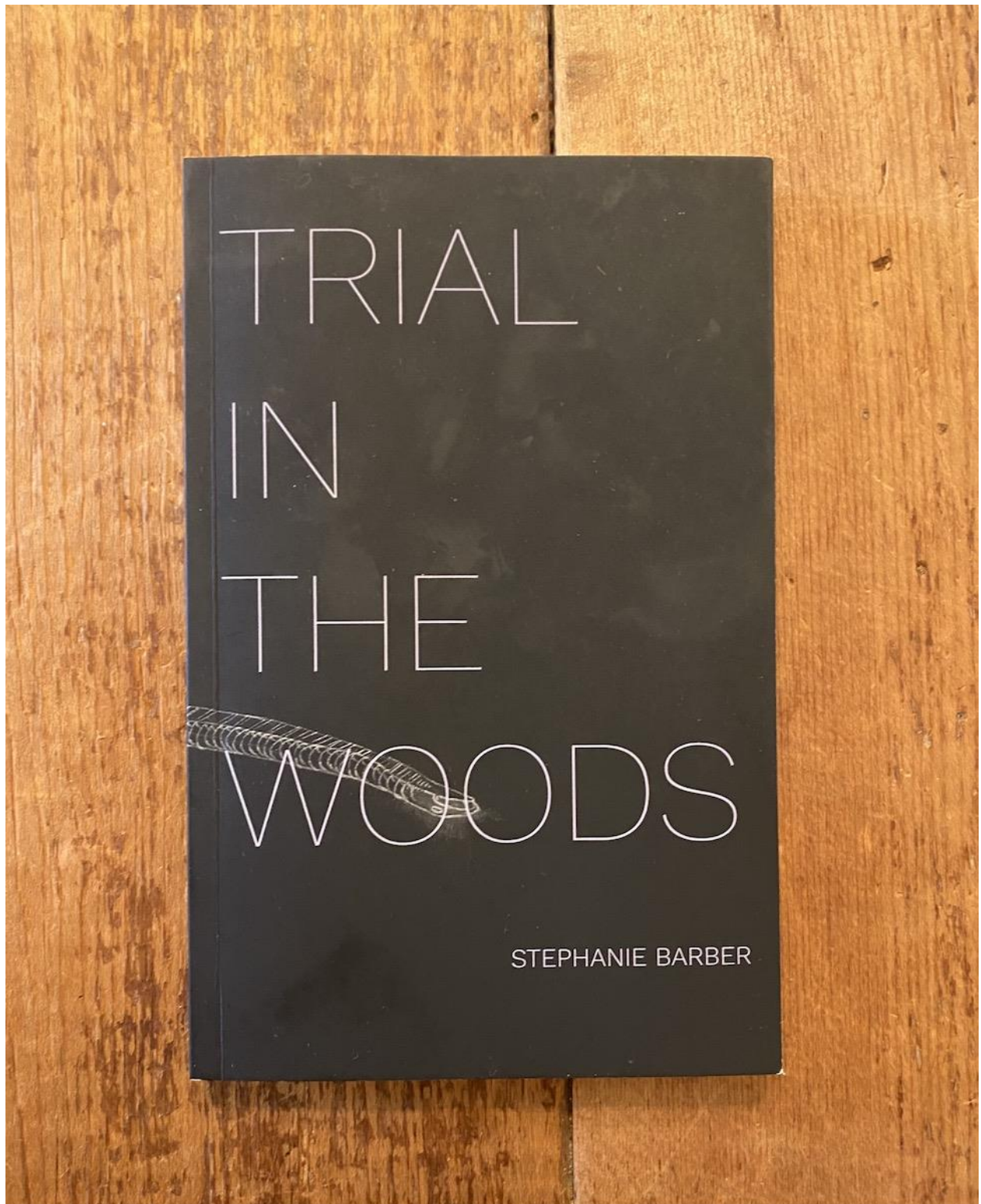
"If Eugène Ionesco were commissioned to write a posthumanist spoof of *The Stranger* and wellness culture while on acid, the result might look something like Stephanie Barber's rollicking and thoroughly enjoyable *Trial in the Woods*, a play that casts forest animals to act out our (human) legal rituals. With humor and lyricism, Barber uses absurdist allegory to poke holes in the foundational assumptions of social contract theory. *Trial in the Woods* raises probing questions about the performativity of law and the relationship between abolition and animality, all the while gracefully balancing philosophical insight and madcap wit."

JACKIE WANG, AUTHOR OF  
CARCERAL CAPITALISM



**PLAYS  
INVERSE**





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*incoherent arguments in literature, the way a writer can weaken an argument they do not agree with by phrasing it clumsily, dismissively, etc. Law and Order SVU does this quite a bit.*

Stephanie Barber

**Rahne Alexander:** I really enjoyed *Trial in the Woods*—like a lot of my favorite art, it’s absurd and hilarious, and deeply serious too. Can you talk about the inspiration to start writing this play, and how it was to see it produced?

Stephanie Barber: Thank you so much for saying so. This balance between seriousness and humor, or absurdity and poignancy, is really important to me as a maker and a viewer. I like experiences (in different media) that have this sort of emotional and intellectual nuance. Because this piece is about ethics and violence (and maybe a very antiquated notion of social contract theory?), it was important for me, aesthetically, to sidestep didacticism, both in the discourse that the characters engage in as well as in the shifting tone of the piece as a piece of art.

The conceit of a courtroom—that back and forth, point/counterpoint, and the willful necessity of spinning two divergent narratives simultaneously—this formal constraint of balance veritably screams for a similar balance and point/counterpoint in emotional (aesthetic) tenor.

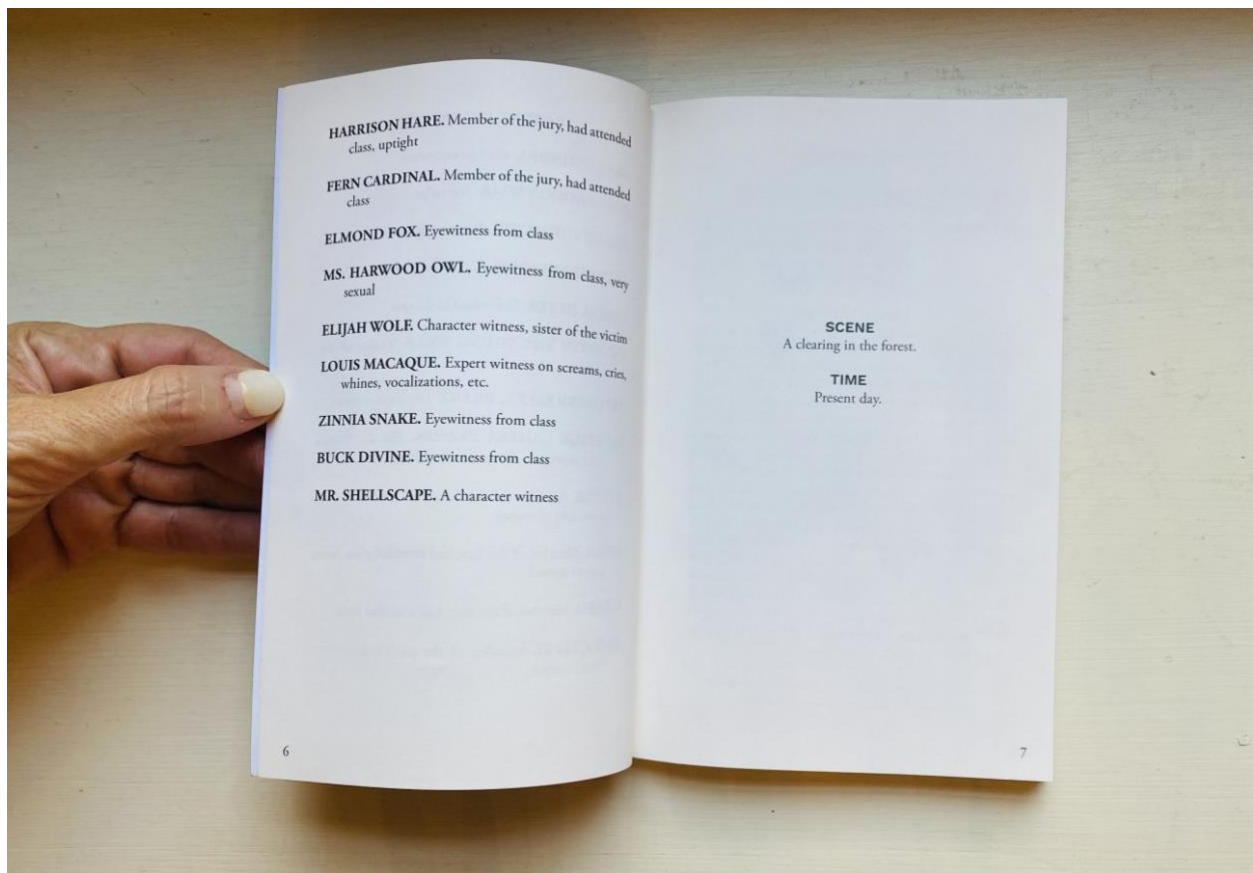
As far as the inspiration, I was commissioned by the Baltimore Annex Theater to write this play, and soon after I began writing the theater broke up and Sarah Jacklin decided to produce the piece elsewhere. It was incredibly fascinating to see the words I had written come to life in that way. I mean, it’s just deeply gratifying to have characters I’d been dreaming and crafting and living with be, all of a sudden, “actual.” It’s a very profound experience that I’ve had before, most obviously when directing feature films from screenplays I’ve written. All of a sudden your words are not in your internal, finger-typing voice but in a body separate from your own. It’s really a particularly funny feeling. A “realizing” of the imagined.

**What inspired you to turn to theater for this script, as opposed, say, to making a film? Did you find it challenging to write in this new way?**

I wrote it simply because I was asked to write it and I had no hand in the production. The form was not a challenge for me because I've written many screenplays for films (both short and feature) and I regularly write from/for characters in other media as well. I also went to a performing arts school where I was a playwriting major when I was in high school, so writing *a play* was not really the challenge.

The material, however, was challenging for me, as this play came out of a lot of violence in my East Baltimore neighborhood. So many things happened and I and my neighbors were either inundated by or ignored by police. I was at the time, and still am, having these constant ethical debates with myself about how best one can address such extreme violence. What are the systems that humans have set up to try to address these kinds of transgressions (murder, etc.), and what is the spiritual and literal efficacy of abiding by, or participating in, these systems? It's very unclear to me and this play was (and still is) a way for me to grapple with these ideas. What is the most effective and compassionate response to violence? It's not clear to me.

Lately I've been reading a lot of David Bohm and one of the words that he uses regularly (when talking about quantum theory or ethics or spiritualism) is *coherence*. I hadn't been thinking about him when I was writing the play, but I kept demanding of myself that each argument the prosecutor and the defense attorney make be truly coherent. I think a lot of bias is evidenced in incoherence. Or the development of incoherent arguments in literature, the way a writer can weaken an argument they do not agree with by phrasing it clumsily, dismissively, etc. *Law and Order SVU* does this quite a bit. It's upsetting, insulting to the audience and the material. Anyway, really demanding of myself that I make coherent arguments on both sides of the topic (the prosecution and the defense) was the greatest challenge. Like boxing myself and not pulling punches to make my particular biases seem the more rational.



*[Otters] are cute and they are very smart. Charismatic is a word humans like to use for animals like an otter. But they are also serial rapists and murderers and there is no denying it, and ethologists don't really have any good theories as to why otters regularly display such unnecessary violence.*

Stephanie Barber

I'd like to know more about the process of choosing which animals you cast into the various roles. Not all of these animals (e.g., turtles, bison) tend to live in the woods. It seems to me that maybe some were chosen for linguistic reasons—like the pun of Elle E. Phant's name, and the lovely melody of the word "macaque." Some seem to be playing against type—you don't often think of a bear as a fitness instructor, for instance. And it also seems important that there's only one of each kind of animal, and so it comes off as a sort of cathexis of the myth of



**Noah's Ark, Ionesco's *Rhinoceros*, and *The Muppet Show*. Why these animals? And specifically, why do you think it's an otter that kills a wolf?**

Yes! Ha! So beautiful. So, yes, the pun of Elle E. Phant's name. This was the name of my cousin Elysia's favorite stuffed animal when we were children. Elysia was very particular when saying her name and it has stuck with me, the way we feel a word differently in our mouths and ears when we know its written mark—even if it might not really sound so very different. Elle E. Phant. And yes to the fantastic sound of “macaque” and their role in the play as an expert witness on screams, cries, whines, and vocalizations.

I think of Bear Chondra, who is the exercise instructor, as not really playing against type. I'm fascinated with the liminal place that bears exist in when hibernating. They don't go entirely under when they're hibernating, not as deeply as some other non-human animals. Bear Chondra's monologue leading the Mix Flow Get Up and Go exercise class moves seamlessly from vanity to transcendence, firm buns to god, vulgarity to gentleness. There is an in-betweenness to the way she leads the class that feels like an echo of that half-hibernating. Maybe a lynx and a squirrel are both kind of “lawyerly” creatures? There is a speed and deliberation there that might be different from the sleepy stoned inference of a bison or turtle? And Zinnia the snake seems a bit expected—their winding, flexible language usage, their rejection of rules, like so many evolutionary queries tossed out by the snake communities every millennium! But it's horribly fraught, isn't it? Just how human animals use non-human animals as metaphors and lessons and models. As if these creatures were living on a separate plane from us, placed here to teach us lessons. I'm certainly not blameless in this.

One of the threads, or jokes, through the play is whether the humans are or are not on trial and how much the game of holding a trial is an appropriation of human animal proceedings not transferrable to “the woods.” To choose animals as characters separates human traits such as culture, age, class, nationality, race, and gender from the actions or ideas the non-human animals are playing with in the trial. It's also an explicit comment on humanity, anthropocentrism, and the parallels between the intractable, untenable constraints of punitive justice and that whole concept of “getting to the truth” as a kind of fixed, visitable, or discoverable entity to the ways that humans view, commodify, use, and destroy non-human beings with impunity. Maybe this is a secret (fanatical) thread which is not as interesting to all readers, but I do think the humans, and the ways we've decided to organize our societies to the detriment of other flora and fauna, should be on trial.

Why an otter? That one is difficult . . . I mean, it's not difficult to say, but I'm almost afraid to write it because I don't want it to be a fixed critique or statement of my choice—the arrogance of a human animal judging a non-human animal—an embarrassing pitfall. Otters have a particular appeal to humans, don't they? They are what we call “cute.” I am so so fascinated by the biological imperative “cute.” They are cute and they are very smart. Charismatic is a word humans like to use for animals like an otter. But they are also serial rapists and murderers and there is no denying it, and ethologists don't really have any good theories as to why otters regularly display such unnecessary violence. But I don't want you to think I am trying to take down the otter a notch, or that I chose that animal solely because of this tendency. I think they are also lovely and tender. I was attracted to this element of existence—that which can't be understood. This is an obvious space that cannot be understood, certainly not by us. I think there is a deep kindness and wisdom in recognizing that most things cannot really be understood.

Mr. Shellscape describes seeing Ovelia Otter and her sister asleep holding paws which enrages Prosecutor Lynx—as if the sweetness of that gesture were an excuse for her senseless murder of Pennstin. Mr. Shellscape says:

*We put things out there . . . we put visions and feelings and ideas into each other . . . some don't stick around very long or make much of an impact at all and some reverberate. That floating trusting love I witnessed on my birthday was like a baptism or conversion or reading an important book. It impressed me and I brought its learning with me into the future. I know that what Ovelia Otter did at Bear Chondra's Mix Flow Get Up And Go exercise class that day made an impression too. I know a lot of that fear and confusion and anger will pass through the woods for generations but I also know she put out some good too, and I guess I just wanted it to be balanced out a bit.*

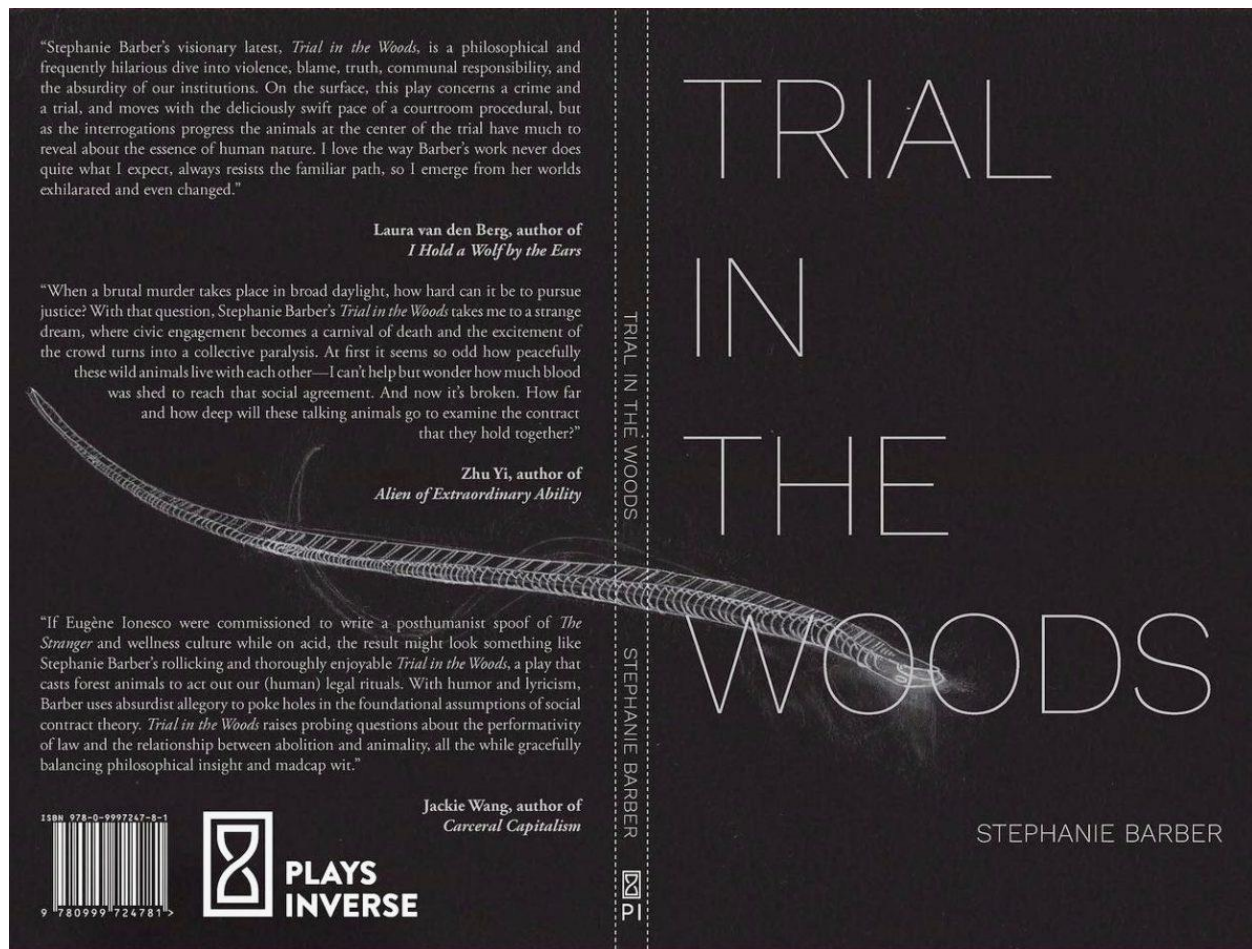
And maybe what I would most want for our penal system is a temporal expansion that just does not fit our speedy, productive society. How do we balance what a being has given to a community, a system, a time, a place? And how far back do we go to gather the metrics?

**I'm interested that the act of violence happens in front of everyone's eyes and seems to be unprovoked, and it seems like it would be a cut-and-dried court case, and yet it's not. So many characters speak their various objections to the systems and the presuppositions of the trial itself, and yet they are engaging in it, but these aren't exactly presented as didactic arguments for, say, abolition—but I also think it's interesting that you don't fall back on the trope of “oh, it's just**

**nature” because some of these creatures are predatory and carnivorous. The otter ends up refusing “forgiveness” and admitting not just to the murder, but to its sensuality.**

I love what you’ve written here. Thank you. As far as forgiveness goes I think it is a much more valuable tool to give than to receive. I’m deeply moved by Franz Fanon’s concept of radical forgiveness and if I even think (as I have just now) about the relatives of the Charleston Church shooting who gave their forgiveness to Dylann Roof I’m reduced to a puddle . . . but I also think I understand why Ovelia refuses forgiveness. I think maybe it’s too soon. She needs to hold onto that agent-regret. Too soon for her to drink that sweet draught.

I read an essay in the New Yorker about people who were accidental murderers—car accidents, etc. A few things were interesting about this—one was a reference to a “city of refuge” in Talmudic law where someone could go to be free of the families’ blood vengeance in the case of an accidental murder—which is profound, isn’t it? I mean, not the escaping a response but a place where one can go to sit with guilt and contemplate the enormity of fate. But the essay also cites a few philosophers and their arguments for expanding the “accidental” in accidental murder. What do we, and what do we not, have control over? What is exactly “accidental?” Having been born into poverty and violence like the young man who stabbed my next-door neighbors to death in a fit of madness? Having been born, as he was, to a mother and a father both of whom died before he was 13 due to drug addiction and violence? Is it an accident to have addiction, mental illness, rage, poor reasoning skills . . . I mean, the circle can go out and, again, I’m not legislating anything, I’m simply thinking about these things and don’t have clear answers but it would be foolish to consider blame without a great deal of dimensionality. And (forgive me) but what people call “nature” plays quite near to chance.



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Stephanie Barber

**Do you think Ovelia Otter will kill again?**

I love this question . . . what do you think? And does it matter? I mean, for the philosophical conceit of indicting the penal system? Or indicting the conceit of blame at all? I don't want to get too silly with the rabbit hole of philosophical implications here but I also don't think it's smart for a society to turn a blind eye to these



implications either. If Ovelia kills again does that mean this trial had been unsuccessful?

**I think a lot about how John Waters talks about why he includes a trial scene in every one of his films—he often focuses on the pageantry and the celebrity of the courtroom (“All people look better under arrest,” he wrote in his book *Shock Value*), so of course *Trial in the Woods* puts me in that mindset. And I like how you, as he often does, imbricate the actual courtroom scene with the “public opinion” trial provided by the reporter. And of course, it often seems that the media trial seeks to get the last word, as it does here. It seems obvious to state that neither courtroom seems to achieve “justice” in any substantive way. Do you think “justice” is possible? Or “community?”**

I don’t think “justice” is possible, or, not in the way we use that word now, here in the contemporary U.S. I actually think it’s a dangerous and childish thing to believe in. I don’t believe in the fixed nature of that concept and the way its intractability allows for so much slippage without owning up to the slipping nature of existence, violence, love, etc. I think we can own up to the provisional nature of the “justice system.” We’re simply too many humans on this planet with too little time to begin to really investigate and deliberate in a truly effective way. I love the concept of law and ethics and rules, I love the rigor that those practices demand, and I love having an agreed-upon modality to move through. I’m no anarchist *but* I’m really saddened by the inexact hammer of punitive justice. Though I work hard to counter each argument and the play does not come clearly down on either side, I’m absolutely a member of the defense team in my own understanding of our time on earth.

When Defense Squirrel S says:

*“What’s preposterous is our understanding that I am entirely correct: that punishment will not bring back Pennstin and neither will it deter other such abuses in the future BUT that nevertheless punish her we will because that is the way it’s always been done. Effective or not.”*

That line, and most all of the Defense Attorney’s lines, are nearing my personal beliefs. But, you know, I’m a poet just here thinking about these things. I’m also cynical and have been around an extreme amount of unmitigated and “unresolved” violence in my life. I recognize that I speak and feel from an extreme amount of bias and that that’s OK. That is, obviously, part of being a creature with one recognizable perspective, this bias of what I’ve seen and read and experienced and done. What is untenable in a system of punitive responses to transgressions of societal contracts is

this awareness of the impossibility of a single perspective from which to view/judge. The need for an extreme lability in such measures married, simultaneously, to a lack of will, finances, time, and patience to draft an endlessly mutable, responsive collection of regulations, laws, codes etc. which might near compassion. It's hard for me to talk about it without getting riled up.

I didn't know that there was a trial scene in every one of John Waters' movies. That's fantastic. I think it's just an incredible literary form. There's so much built into the space and pace of what is expected. What is expected is the statement of a belief and its opposite. In my play, there's a bit of wisecracking from the jury. That's not really an expected formal conceit, but it works really well. It's great that you mention *The Muppet Show*—a piece of artwork I revere above most others—because the turtle and the bison on the jury in *Trial in the Woods* owe a bit to Statler and Waldorf. There's wise-cracking from the jury, some herding and directing from the judge, and a sort of Greek chorus or social media comments stream from Elle E. Phant outside of the trial.

It's interesting that the play is about rules and the efficacy (or lack therein) of enforcing them when I am so clearly enamored of the rules of the literary form “courtroom drama.” I love a formal structure for the implicit knowledge you share with an audience, a sort of shorthand you can rely on. It's this shorthand, structurally, that works so well here and can be so disastrous in an actual courtroom. Guilt and cause and understanding require a huge amount of time in the real world.

And, yes, I think community is possible, I mean, I love how we all function and work and move through so many different communities, where we work and where we live and our families and our different groups of friends. The reason community is possible is because it is assumed to be fluent and always changing and responsive to the members and not a fixed-in-stone place. We build our various, often very different communities each time we use them. Communities are how the members are moving and do not exist without use.

**The play ends with quotes from D'Angelo's “Devil's Pie.” Can you tell me more about why you chose this song as the end note?**

I love the line “ain't no justice, just us” from that song. I mean, I just love that song but the simple profundity and rightness of that pithy line felt absolutely perfect to me, both for my play but also as a concise and elegant truism. And the final line, from the same song, “I know I was born to die, trying to find, peace of mind” is also a fantastic summation of a simultaneous hopefulness and nihilism that seems to mark humans' time on earth. Or mine at least.

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Header image: Isa Leal (as Pennstin) and Emily Hall (as Prosecutor Lynx) taken by Dave Iden, from the Mercury Theater production of Trial in the Woods, June 2018. Image courtesy of Sarah Jacklin

- Words: Rahne Alexander