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## Preview: The Simian Showcase

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*MONDO's art department doesn't often have the opportunity to geek out as much as its neighbouring departments, Comics and Film. It's just our luck, it seems, that tonight Monkeyman Productions, the self-described "geekiest theatre company in Toronto," will present four new plays in its Simian Showcase, running at the Imperial Pub until April 16. Videogames, time travel, LARPing, and steampunk culture—it's all covered. Art department editor Kerry Freek talked with two of the directors over gmail chat earlier this week.*



**First up, Neil Silcox, director of Camilla Maxwell's *Chun Li*.**

**MONDO:** How's the production going? Are you ready for opening night?

**Neil:** Yeah, I'm feeling really good about it. We had our Tech/Dress last night and it went over really well with the people who hadn't seen it before.

**MONDO:** Great! What exactly attracted you to "geek" theatre? I've seen you in other shows (*Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Twelfth Night*) and this seems like a bit of a jump away from Shakespeare.

**Neil:** That's a part of what drew me to it. I found myself in—not exactly a rut, let's say a groove. The top or my resume just kept saying Hart House, Hart House, Canopy, Hart House, Hart House, Canopy. I really loved working with those people, but I thought I needed to diversify. So anyway, one day I'm sitting on the subway and Marty Choderek [one of Monkeyman's founding members] plops down beside me and we got to talking about Monkeyman and I asked if they were looking for directors.

**MONDO:** Is directing a new thing for you?

**Neil:** I've got a few directing credits under my belt, but it is new for me to be working with just a couple of people. Mostly I direct big musicals or Shakespeare, usually with twenty or thirty people in the cast. It's nice to be able to focus on details with just a couple of actors.

**MONDO:** Are you (or were you ever) a big gamer?

**Neil:** I'm an embarrassingly huge Final Fantasy geek. And I really like console RPGs of any ilk. And though I enjoy a good side-scroller or first person every now and then, when I really want to get my game on I usually reach for something with the Square-Enix logo on it.

**MONDO:** Sounds like you're well suited to direct a play named after a Street Fighter character. Can you tell me a bit about *Chun Li* (the show, not the thighs)?

**Neil:** It's a show about a twenty-something geek (Justin) who brings along his best friend (Kyle) for moral support when he has to make his first trip to an STI clinic. Kyle is pretty sure that Justin hasn't even had sex yet, but Justin reveals that he did, once, and it was with Kyle's little sister.

**MONDO:** Snap!

**Neil:** Ha. Yeah. I really liked this play because it manages to strike a solid balance between being absurd and being really truthful. Plus it's really funny.

**MONDO:** Have you worked directly with Camilla [the playwright]? Is this the first time the show's been produced?

**Neil:** I corresponded with Camilla early on in the process. She's an Aussie playwright living in NYC now, and she wrote the play a couple of years ago now. It's been performed a few times and is clearly pretty polished. Camilla herself, however, hasn't had any direct involvement with this production. Unless you count the fact that she wrote the play, which I guess you could consider "direct involvement."

**MONDO:** Yeah, there's that. What's next for you after this show? More geek stuff?

**Neil:** My next project is a production of *The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee* that I'm directing with the Toronto Youth Theatre in May, and then I'm back to Shakespeare in the summer performing in *The Comedy of Errors* with Humber River Shakespeare.

**MONDO:** Sounds like you're pretty busy. Best of luck with the Monkeyman run!

**Neil:** Thanks very much.

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**And Tom McGee, director of Mark Harvey Levine's *Howard*.**

**Tom:** Good morning, Kerry.

**MONDO:** Morning, Tom! How are you?

**Tom:** I'm marvellous! Got a coffee in hand so my morning had just improved vastly. How about you?

**MONDO:** Earl Grey is my caffeine of choice, and I'm much better now that I've had it. Poor Neil caught me before I had cup in hand. I was a bit cranky, but I think we pulled through.

**Tom:** Hahaha, a friend of mine once called caffeine "personality in a cup"; couldn't agree more!

**MONDO:** Makes sense. So how's the show looking as opening night approaches?

**Tom:** The show is looking incredible; I'm extremely fortunate to have a cast that continues to play and have fun with the script. As a result, the show has a really neat organic feel to it. They continue to surprise and entertain with each run and I can't wait to get them up on stage in front of an audience.

**MONDO:** Great — with that dynamic force have you managed to find out whether time travel is viable?

**Tom:** Oh, entirely! *Howard* has been a joy to work on, because it's written for nerds like us who have argued over time paradoxes in the *Terminator* films or the various *Star Trek* "time-travel adventure of the week" episodes. We've had a great time working through the nuances of how time travel works in the script; and I've been lucky enough to be able to direct the show almost entirely in *Back to the Future* quotes! Mark Harvey Levine [the playwright] has given fans of the genre (like the actors and myself) a real labour of love with *Howard*, a play where even the characters are fans of time travel and comment on the weird loopholes in the genre. And having worked through the play, I think I can speak for the entire cast when I say: time travel is entirely

possible, if you have the right DeLorean, British Telephone Box, Skynet-endorsed blue time-travel orb, or the Enterprise. Any one of those things and you should be good to go. Just don't talk to anyone or change anything.

**MONDO:** Wow! Great answer. So you're a nerd? I thought this was "geek" theatre. I've always wondered: what's the difference?

**Tom:** Well, I happily count myself a member of both fine groups; my friends and I have often debated this and I think the distinction is that geeks are people who are passionate about niche interests: video games, Live Action Role Playing, Dungeons and Dragons, Sci Fi or Fantasy, or even musical theatre (many of my friends are proud musical theatre geeks). Geeks have a passion and deep engagement with their niche and in the case of Monkeyman Productions, that has yielded this delightful hybrid of geek interests and theatre. Geek interests are becoming more mainstream (particularly after the advent of the internet!) but rarely do you get to enjoy them played out in live theatre, which is where Monkeyman comes in. Coming back to your initial question, a nerd—by my reckoning and self description—is one who brings an academic slant to his/her geekery. Whether this is passion for mathematics or science (neither of which am I on speaking terms with anymore) or for trying to delve into the science or continuity of a piece. For instance, in *Howard* we have had extremely nerdy conversations about how each character's timeline operates and how changing the past will affect them. It was hyper-technical in an absurd and delightful pseudo-scientific way that would have done Doc Brown proud. But ultimately, geeks and nerds are part of one big niche-y family, one that's accepting and varied and happily reflected in Monkeyman itself.

**MONDO:** Do you expect that audiences will be just as geeky as the members of Monkeyman?

**Tom:** In part, but it's certainly not a requirement! One of my favourite parts of Monkeyman is that while the plays are often geeky in nature and content, they are always about relationships and interesting stories. These are great stories that anyone can relate to that happen to feature references to geek interests, but are not just one big inside joke for the fans of the genre. While there might be little things here and there that geeks will get, these shows are for everyone. For instance, *Test* [another play in the Simian Showcase] is set at a Live Action Role Playing (LARP) conference, but is really about two people struggling to reconnect. While I'm not very familiar with LARPing, the story and the characters' relationships connected with me and as such I really enjoy the piece. Even when I was an audience member watching a Monkeyman production for the first time, I remember being blown away by how great the relationships and stories were: it's not about geeks doing geeky things, but rather people with geeky interests dealing with life same as anyone else...except there's time travel.

**MONDO:** Sweet. I was worried that my measly experience as a level 4 D&D n00b would hinder my enjoyment of the Showcase. Thanks for the encouragement!

**Tom:** Hahaha, there's nothing wrong with level 4. And thanks! I can't wait to get *Howard* up in front of an audience, it's going to be a lot of fun getting to see an audience encounter this charming tale of time travel and regret for the first time.

**MONDO:** Thanks for your time this morning, Tom.

**Tom:** My pleasure. Thanks for the opportunity to talk geeky theatre!