



## Thor Hopper

Adapted from the short story "In the Penal Colony" by Franz Kafka

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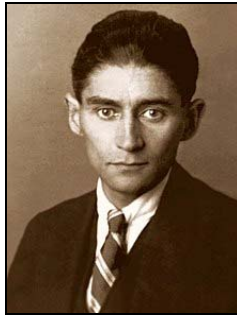
**Rapid City, SD 57709**

## BE JUST!

**HORROR/SATIRE.** Adapted from the short story “In the Penal Colony” by Franz Kafka. An esteemed foreigner arrives at a penal colony and is asked to witness an elaborate torture and execution device that inscribes into a prisoner’s skin the law he has broken before letting him die, a process that takes 12 excruciating hours. An Officer who is the sole defender and advocate of the apparatus gleefully shows off the device to the Traveler and describes the current system of absolute justice in which the accused is instantly found guilty with no opportunity for a defense. The Officer begs the Traveler to vouch for the device to the new commandant so that the brutal executions may continue. When the Traveler refuses, the Officer frees the Prisoner and sets up the machine to inscribe “Be Just” into his own flesh. This provocative, timely play mixes horror with gallows humor and provides an opportunity for a tour de force performance by the Officer.

**Performance Time:** Approximately 30-45 minutes.

**NOTE:** The full-length version (60 minutes) is available online.



Franz Kafka in 1923

## ABOUT THE STORY

Franz Kafka (1883-1924) is considered one of the most influential writers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, though he achieved little literary fame during his lifetime. Born and raised in Prague, Kafka spoke Czech but preferred to write in German. Kafka was the eldest of six children and had a troubled relationship with his father, a domineering and demanding shopkeeper who once worked as a traveling salesman. This father-son conflict deeply influenced much of Kafka's writing in which he incorporates themes of alienation, cruelty, authoritarian power, and the absurdity of existence. Today, the term "Kafkaesque" is used to describe that which is surreal, nightmarish, and incomprehensibly complex. Kafka earned a law degree but did not practice law. Instead, Kafka worked for an insurance company so that he would have time to write in the evenings. Suffering from tuberculosis and unable to eat due to pain, Kafka died of starvation on June 3, 1924. The rest of Kafka's family, except for two brothers who died in infancy, died in the Holocaust. Kafka's most well-known works include his novels *The Trial* and *The Castle*, his novella *The Metamorphosis*, and his short story, "In the Penal Colony," which was written in October 1914 and published in 1919.

## CHARACTERS

(4 flexible, opt. extras)

**OFFICER:** Nostalgic, fastidious officer in charge of operating an apparatus that tortures and kills the condemned; fiercely devoted, the officer wants the esteemed Traveler to vouch for the device to the new commandant so that he can continue the tortuous executions; looks like he is ready to appear in a parade; wears a uniform jacket adorned with silver braids and tassels, a cap, and undergarments; flexible.

**TRAVELER:** Esteemed foreigner from an unspecified country who has been asked by the new commandant of a penal colony to witness the torture and death of a prisoner; restless, disinterested and speaks with a flat, unaffected tone; flexible.

**PRISONER:** Charged with “disobeying and insulting his superior”; has a brutish, vacant look but enjoys clowning around with the Soldier; his hair, face, and torn shirt, trousers, and undergarments are filthy; flexible.

**SOLDIER:** Clownish soldier responsible for guarding the Prisoner; wears a uniform; flexible.

**WORKERS (opt.):** Coffee house customers; they wear dirty, torn shirts and trousers; flexible. (Note: Workers appear only in the Epilogue and are not needed if the epilogue is not performed.)

## SETTING

A foreign, tropical island that serves as a penal colony.

## SETS

**Apparatus room.** The apparatus sits CS. (See Special Effects for description of apparatus.) On one side of the apparatus is a shallow “pit” that can be indicated with a short wall of piled-up dirt. The flooring is dirt/sand. There is a wooden bucket of “water” and a stack of old wicker/cane chairs.

**Downtown area on the island.** There is a backdrop of dilapidated houses and shops. One building has a sign that reads, “Coffee House.” The street side of the coffee house is open along its full width. It is cave-like with smoke-covered walls. There are some small tables with chairs. There is a simple stone grave under one of the tables. The gravestone reads, “Here rests the Old Commandant. Have faith and wait!” (Note: This set is only required if the Epilogue is performed.)

BE JUST!  
7

## PROPS

Heavy chain to which is  
connected smaller chains (to  
bind Prisoner's feet, wrists, and  
neck)

Ladder

2 Handkerchiefs

Wooden bucket of "water"

Dirty hand towel

Screwdriver

Lump of dirty cotton (felt)

Small leather folder (for diagram)

Dirt/sand for floor

Coins

Apparatus diagram

(labyrinthine lines  
crisscrossing each other  
with little white space)

Torn strap

Spoon

Bowl of rice pudding

Rifle with bayonet, for Soldier  
(or a prop sword may be  
used)

2 Ladies' handkerchiefs

Sword with scabbard, for  
Officer

## SPECIAL EFFECTS

(Note: The “apparatus” doesn’t have to move or work. This is accomplished with sound effects, see below.)

“Apparatus.” A massive mechanical apparatus that looks imposing/menacing. It looks like a complicated mass of connecting rods, chains, steel cables, gears, cogs, brass rods, and metal wheels. There are three main parts of the apparatus: 1.) The “bed,” which is large enough for the prisoner to lie down on. 2.) The “inscriber” hangs above the bed and can be lowered, if desired. 3) The “harrow” has large iron-looking needles sticking from it. The bed has worn straps for both wrists and ankles. There is an outlet pipe that leads to the “pit.” When the apparatus starts to “fall apart,” small individual parts may be attached with fishing line so they can be pulled off onto the floor. (The following is just a suggestion of how the apparatus is constructed.) The bed and inscriber are the same size and look like two dark chests. The inscriber hangs above the bed. The harrow hangs between the bed and inscriber. The inscriber and bed are joined together at the corners by four brass rods, opt.

Clinking sound

Squeaking sound of a wheel

“Vomit,” opt. (Can be oatmeal, etc. or merely suggested.)

Clanking sound

Sound of apparatus starting up

Audible hum of machinery

Fake blood



BE JUST!  
9

"DO YOU SEE  
THE SHAME OF IT?"

-OFFICER

## BE JUST!

(AT RISE: A foreign, tropical island that serves as a penal colony. A very bright light shines down on the "apparatus." A Soldier enters, escorting a Prisoner. A Traveler enters behind them. The Soldier is holding a heavy chain to which are connected small chains that bind the Prisoner by his feet, wrist, and neck. These smaller chains are linked to each other by connecting chains. The Prisoner has a look of resignation on his face.)

TRAVELER: (To Soldier.) I am neither a citizen of this penal colony nor a citizen of the state, but I responded to the invitation of the Commandant—only out of politeness—to attend the execution of a... (Indicating Prisoner.) ...prisoner condemned for disobeying and insulting his superior.

SOLDIER: Interest in this execution isn't really very high even on this island.

(Officer enters.)

OFFICER: (To Traveler, admiring the apparatus.) It's a remarkable apparatus. (Traveler shows little interest in the apparatus and paces behind the Prisoner as the Officer enthusiastically makes final preparations by crawling under the apparatus and then climbing up a ladder to inspect the upper parts. Inspecting.) This really could have been left to a mechanic, but I'm particularly fond of this apparatus, and this work can't be entrusted to anyone else. (Climbs down the ladder. Excited.) It's all ready now!

(Traveler wipes his brow from the heat and slips the two handkerchiefs under the back of his collar.)

TRAVELER: Your uniforms are really too heavy for the tropics.

OFFICER: That's true. *(Begins to wash oil/grease from his hands in a bucket of water.)* But the uniforms mean home, and we don't want to lose our homeland. *(Dries his hands with a towel. Pointing to the apparatus, proudly.)* Now, have a look at this apparatus. Up to this point, I still had to do some work by hand, but from now on, the apparatus works entirely on its own.

TRAVELER: *(Indifferent, nods.)* I see...

OFFICER: Of course, breakdowns do happen. I really hope none will occur today, but we must be prepared for them. The apparatus is supposed to keep going for 12 hours without interruption, but if any breakdowns occur, they are only very minor and will be dealt with right away. *(To Traveler.)* Don't you want to sit down? *(Pulls out a chair from a pile of wicker chairs and offers it to the Traveler. Traveler sits on the edge of the shallow "pit" and glances into it.)* I don't know whether the Commandant has already explained the apparatus to you...?

TRAVELER: *(Indifferent.)* No, not really.

OFFICER: *(Proudly.)* This apparatus... *(Grabs a connecting rod and leans against it.)* ...is our previous Commandant's invention. I also worked with him on the very first tests and took part in all the work right up to its completion. However, the credit for the invention belongs entirely to him alone. Have you heard of our previous Commandant?

TRAVELER: *(Indifferent.)* No, not really.

*(During the following, the Soldier winds the Prisoner's chain around both wrists and supports himself with his hand on his weapon, letting his head hang backward, making it evident that he is bored and is not listening to the Officer.)*

OFFICER: *(Surprised.)* No? Well, I'm not claiming too much when I say that the organization of the entire penal colony is his work. We, his friends, already knew at the time of his death that the administration of the colony was so self-

contained that even if his successor had a thousand new plans in mind, he would not be able to alter anything of the old plan, at least not for several years. *(Sighs.)* It's a shame that you didn't know the previous Commandant. *(Slight pause. With a screwdriver, he adjusts screws here and there on the apparatus as he continues.)* However, I'm chattering, and his apparatus stands here in front of us. As you see, it consists of three parts. *(Note: For the following, the Prisoner does what he can to follow the Officer's explanation by directing his gaze to the places on the apparatus where the Officer is pointing.)* With the passage of time, certain popular names have been developed for each of these parts. *(Pointing to a part of the apparatus.)* The one underneath is called the "bed." *(Pointing.)* The upper one is called the "inscriber." And, here, in the middle... *(Pointing.)* ...this moving part...is called the "harrow."

*(The Traveler, who hadn't been paying close attention, suddenly perks up.)*

TRAVELER: The harrow?

*(Prisoner shoots the Traveler a hard look.)*

OFFICER: *(Proudly.)* Yes, the harrow! Anyway, you'll understand in a moment. The condemned is laid out here on the bed. *(Points to the bed.)* I'll describe the apparatus first, and only then, let the procedure go to work. That way, you'll be able to follow it better. *(Warning.)* By the way, a sprocket in the inscriber is excessively worn. It really squeaks. When it's in motion, one can hardly make oneself understood. *(Chuckles. Sadly.)* Unfortunately, replacement parts are difficult to come by in this place. *(Pointing to bed.)* So, here is the bed, as I said. The whole thing is completely covered with a layer of cotton wool. The condemned is laid out on his stomach on this cotton wool. There are straps for

the hands here... *(Points.)* ...for the feet here...  
*(Points.)* ...and for the throat here... *(Points.)* ...to tie him  
securely. At the head of the bed here... *(Points.)* ...where  
the condemned, as I have mentioned, first lies facedown, is  
this small protruding lump of felt, which can easily be  
adjusted so that it presses right into the condemned's mouth.

*(The Traveler bends down to take a closer look at the lump of felt.)*

TRAVELER: That's cotton wool?

OFFICER: *(Smiling.)* Yes, it is. Feel it for yourself. *(Takes the  
Traveler by the hand and leads him closer to the bed. Proudly.)*  
It's a specially prepared cotton wool. Its purpose is to  
prevent the condemned from screaming and biting his  
tongue to pieces. Of course, the condemned has to leave the  
felt in his mouth, otherwise the straps around his throat will  
break his neck.

*(With his hand over his eyes to protect them from the bright light  
shining down on the apparatus, the Traveler looks up at the height of  
the apparatus. The Prisoner imitates the Traveler, but since he  
doesn't put his hand over his eyes, he blinks and shrinks back at the  
intense light.)*

TRAVELER: *(Unimpressed, bored.)* It's certainly an interesting  
apparatus.

OFFICER: *(Smiling.)* Ah! Your interest is aroused!

*(The Officer steps back to allow the Traveler time to look closer at the  
apparatus. Feigning interest, the Traveler goes through the motions  
by quickly inspecting the apparatus and then sits down in a chair.  
Awkward pause as the Officer gazes at the apparatus with pride.)*

TRAVELER: *(Anxious for the Officer to wrap it up.)* So now the  
man is lying down... *(Leans back in his chair and crosses his  
legs.)*

OFFICER: Yes. (*Pushes his cap back and wipes his sweaty face with his hand.*) As soon as the condemned is strapped in securely, the bed is set in motion. It quivers with tiny, very rapid oscillations from side to side and up and down simultaneously. All movements are precisely calibrated, for they must be meticulously coordinated with the movements of the harrow. But it's the harrow that has the job of actually carrying out the sentence.

TRAVELER: (*Uninterested.*) What is the sentence?

OFFICER: (*Astonished.*) You don't even know that? Previously, it was the Commandant's habit to provide such explanations, but the new Commandant has excused himself from this honorable duty. However, with such an eminent visitor... (*Traveler tries to deflect the honor, but the Officer insists.*) ...that with such an eminent visitor, he didn't make you aware that the form of our sentencing is yet again something new, which— (*Stops himself from saying more.*) In any case, I am certainly the person best able to explain our style of sentencing, for here I am carrying... (*Pats his chest pocket.*) ...the relevant diagrams drawn by the previous Commandant.

TRAVELER: (*Surprised.*) Diagrams made by the Commandant himself? Was he a soldier, judge, engineer, chemist, and draftsman?

OFFICER: (*Nodding, proudly. With reverence.*) He was, indeed. (*Examining his hands.*) Excuse me, my hands aren't clean enough to handle the diagrams. (*Goes to the bucket and "washes" his hands. He dries his hands and carefully pulls out a small leather folder.*) The law the condemned has violated is inscribed on his body with the harrow. (*Pointing to Prisoner.*) This condemned prisoner, for example... (*Prisoner keeps his head down but listens intently in order to learn which law he has violated.*) ...will have inscribed on his body, "Honor your superiors!"

(*Traveler looks over at the Prisoner, who looks surprised at the news.*)

TRAVELER: *(To Officer, indicating Prisoner.)* Does the prisoner know his sentence?

OFFICER: No.

TRAVELER: *(Astonished.)* He doesn't know his own sentence?

OFFICER: No. *(Matter-of-fact.)* It would be useless to give the condemned that information because he experiences it on his own body.

*(The Prisoner looks over at the Traveler to see if he approves of what the Officer has just said. Shocked, the Traveler, who had up to this point been leaning back in his chair, leans forward.)*

TRAVELER: But does the prisoner know that he's been condemned?

OFFICER: Not that, either.

TRAVELER: *(Shocked.)* No?! *(Wiping sweat from his forehead.)*  
So the prisoner does not yet know, even at this point, that he is condemned?

OFFICER: He has had no opportunity to defend himself.

*(The Officer looks away so as not to embarrass the Traveler with an explanation of matters so self-evident. Traveler stands.)*

TRAVELER: But he must have had a chance to defend himself?!

*(The Officer takes the Traveler by the arm and points to the Prisoner. The Prisoner is standing stiffly now that all the attention is directed at him. Soldier yanks on the Prisoner's chain for no apparent reason.)*

OFFICER: *(Matter of fact.)* Here in the penal colony, I have been appointed judge—in spite of my youth—for I stood at the side of our previous Commandant in all matters of punishment, and I also know the most about the apparatus. The basic principle I use for my decisions is this: Guilt is always beyond a doubt. **[END OF FREEVIEW]**