

JONATHAN KALB

## GULLIVER'S CHOICE

### *Note on the Text*

*Gulliver's Choice* is a counterplay to Heiner Müller's *Mauser* (1970), which is itself a counterplay to Bertolt Brecht's *The Measures Taken* (1930). All three plays are experiments with the Brechtian *Lehrstück*, or learning play, a dramatic form designed to raise questions about the relationship of individuals to groups. In the learning plays of Müller and Brecht, the group is always a surrogate for the communist collective, and the dramatic crises involve revolutionary demands for the disappearance of self in the interests of that collective. To this pattern Müller added a distinctively German note of obsession with fanatical duty, conveyed through inflammatory echoes of Heinrich von Kleist's *The Prince of Homburg*.

In *Gulliver's Choice* the imperative of revolution has been replaced with that of occupation and collective interest has been exchanged for the obligation to an abstraction called *freedom*. From today's American perspective, the immediate horror isn't homicidal dictatorship but rather the exploitation of fear by democratic authorities and the dismantling of democracy to make the world safe for democracy. Not mass killing but rather selective killing is our condoned brutality, with the representation of violence, and the control of information about it, points of dispute as contentious as the violence itself. As for fanatical duty, supporters of capital punishment and those who honorably beg for it may be the best judges of how American or German it is.

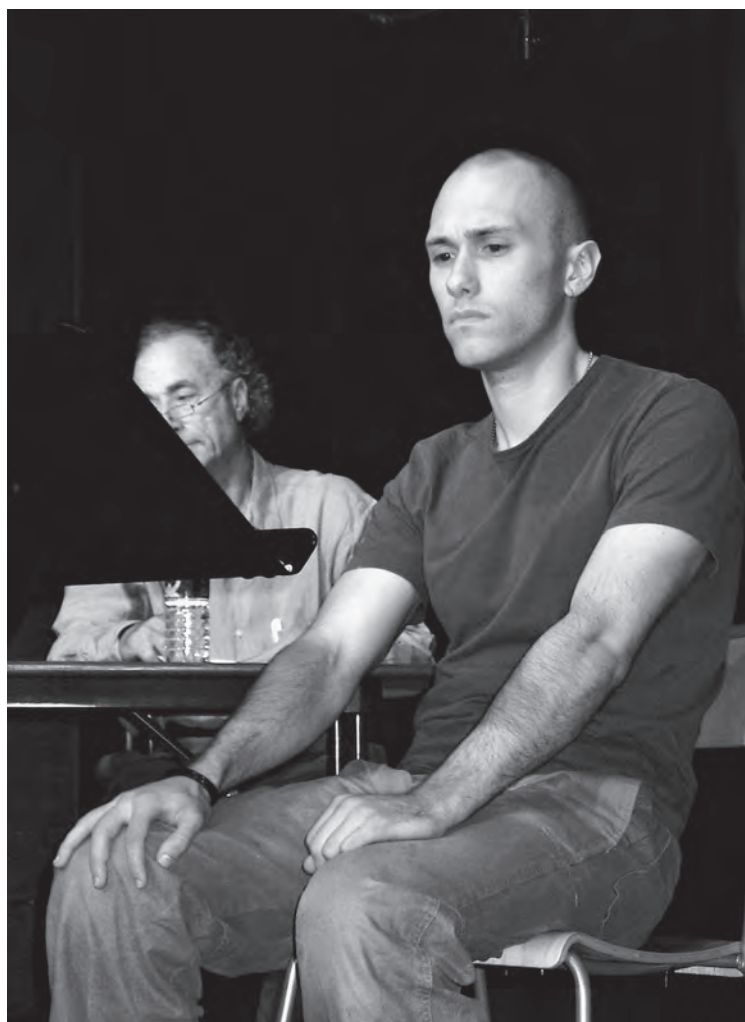
My effort to adapt *Mauser* to American circumstances dates back to 1989, when I discussed the idea with Müller. My first plan was for a satirical piece called *The Death of Gulliver*, about a misanthropic world traveler who returns home to find his aversions grotesquely reflected in nonchalant vigilante killing. I explained to Müller that, because individualism was also a richly embattled subject in the West, it could be terrifically provocative to apply his play's infuriating logic to the so-called free world. He puffed his cigar and sipped his whiskey in that inscrutable way he had and, finally, said, "Go ahead and try it." Serious frustration was the result. I picked up and dropped

the project several times, trying out various settings and degrees of seriousness. Not until George W. Bush became president and, in the wake of 9/11, started blithely subverting the Bill of Rights did I fully understand what Müller no doubt saw right away: the extremity of *Mauser's* circumstances isn't negotiable. *Mauser's* dramatic fuel is its sense of emergency; the action is set at a crucial point during the Russian civil war, when the survival of communism hangs in the balance. Any American adaptation thus needs extreme historical circumstances of its own, an analogous sense of emergency in which the survival of basic democratic principles is at stake. Horribly, the Iraq war dropped these circumstances in my lap.

It is perhaps worth mentioning that *Gulliver's Choice* was completed in December 2003, four months before the prisoner-abuse scandal at Abu Ghraib became public.

Current appearances to the contrary, then, its topicality is not its essence, and it should make sense theatrically long after Abu Ghraib is forgotten. *Gulliver's Choice* has no stage directions because the precise relationship of its chorus to its two individualized characters is deliberately left to the actors and director to establish. The chorus is conceived as a generalized pool out of which individuals emerge as needed for particular scenes and into which they dissolve when no longer needed. Ambiguous designations, such as G (CHORUS) and CHORUS (G), indicate heightened moments of identity-blending, with the former suggesting (for example) that the individual character is still dominant; the latter, that collective thought holds temporary sway. The distribution of lines among actors is left to the director. Much can be done with exchangeable costume pieces. One actor needn't possess a role (including that of Gulliver) for the entire performance, though this

Trevor Oswalt in a reading of *Gulliver's Choice*, New Group, New York City, 2004. Photo: Julie Heffernan



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may be desirable in some conceptions. An open exploration in rehearsal is the best way to ensure that questions are put to the audience openly, so that learning has a chance to occur.

I might add that—as the various staged readings of the play have amply demonstrated—the chorus can and should be a source of humor as well as horror. The chorus members do not themselves necessarily believe all the fetishized phrases they utter. Like Gulliver, they are caught in a machine whose main presence in the play is the rhythmic, repetitive language. Part of the director's challenge is to find the variety in their attitudes—through a physical action that complements and challenges the words—while making clear that the machine will eventually grind everyone to pieces.