Stef Smith and Tuğba Aygan

In Conversation: On *Human Animals*

With her politically engaged writing and innovative adaptations, Stef Smith is one of the most distinctive voices in contemporary British theatre. She first gained recognition in 2010 for *Roadkill*, which won an Olivier Award, and her later plays, such as *Swallow* (2015), *Girl in the Machine* (2017), and *Enough* (2019), have been staged internationally. While each of these pieces attests to the playwright's ability to confront such urgent social issues as technology, gender, and identity, the focus of her 2016 play *Human Animals* is on humans' fragile relationship with animals and the wider environment. By foregrounding animals as literal and symbolic agents, the play challenges its audiences to reconsider the boundaries between human and non-human animals, and the ethical implications of survival. In this interview, conducted in December 2025, Tuğba Aygan talks to Stef Smith about *Human Animals.* Their discussion highlights Smith's creative process, thematic concerns, and her insights into our relationship with non-human animals.

Tuğba Aygan holds a PhD in English Literature from Atatürk University, Erzurum, Turkey, where she works as an Associate Professor. Her current research focuses on representations of animals in theatre.

Key terms: speciesism, non-human animals, dystopia, animal studies, climate crisis.

STEF SMITH is a multi-award-winning contemporary Scottish playwright known for her socially engaged plays, which address political and ethical tensions in modern society. Her 2016 play *Human Animals* portrays a dystopian vision of a city where reports of animal infestation spread, leading to the killing of animals believed to be infectious. At first, pigeons and foxes are targeted and killed (after all, 'No one likes foxes anyway'),[1] but gradually the violence spreads to all quadrupeds, including pets, and the parts of nature that provide shelter for these animals. Using a fragmented and non-linear structure, the play follows a group of characters with closely interconnected lives, depicting their varying attitudes towards an escalating mass hysteria being directed at animals and the natural world. Set in a not-so-distant future urban environment, it speculates about a looming future in a real world shaped by ecological and ethical crises, ultimately questioning humanity's capacity for compassion and its destructive relationship with nature. As one of relatively few plays to have centred on non-human animals, Stef Smith's *Human Animals* occupies a distinctive position, and supplies a meaningful contribution to current discussions surrounding the non-human. I began our conversation by asking her about the play's origins.

Tuğba Aygan *You are renowned for addressing a variety of bold and socially relevant topics, ranging from technology and gender to trauma, and for giving voice and visibility to women and other marginalized groups. Your play* Human Animals *explores another marginalized group, namely non-human animals. What inspired you to write this play and include non-human animals?*

Stef Smith I think my love and respect for non-human animals was instilled by my parents, who have always had a fondness for animals and wildlife. I also grew up somewhere quite rural and so almost daily encountered wild animals – deer, sheep, mice, and of course our beloved pets. I had become a vegetarian at the age of fifteen as I could no longer reconcile myself with the hypocrisy of being a

NTQ 41:2 (MAY 2025) © The Author(s), 2026. Published by Cambridge University Press
doi:10.1017/S0266464X2610089X

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266464X2610089X Published online by Cambridge University Press

meat eater and an animal lover. This was also when I learned about the concept of speciesism, a misguided belief that asserts superiority of one species in order to justify the unjust treatment of other species. Over a decade later, I finally moved my own personal interest in speciesism into my professional life by writing *Human Animals*.

Could you elaborate on the meaning behind the title Human Animals*? Is it a critique, a reflection, or simply an observation of human nature?*

It was always very clear to me that this should be the title of the play. It felt like it captured the big idea behind the play, along with a sense of its tone. Playful. Prying. Pointed.

In their reviews of the Royal Court premiere of Human Animals*, theatre critics such as Alex Sierz, Michael Billington, and Emma Smith assert that the play is not about actual animals and consider animals as mere metaphors for humans, referring to the Holocaust or immigrants. Did you really use them as a backdrop for humans and their experiences, or are they real subjects with agency and presence?*

I wanted to give the audience space to be able to receive both readings of the text: as an examination of speciesism and of our treatment of humans. I firmly believe that how we treat non-human animals is indicative of how we treat humans. The non-human animals in the play were never meant to act as simple metaphor, but they could be read as such (Figure 1).

From the very beginning of literary and dramatic history, animals have almost always served as stand-ins for humans or symbolic referents. How do you think this tendency impacts real-life human–animal relationships? And to what extent portraying animals as agents of their lives, rather



Figure 1. *Human Animals*, Royal Court Theatre, 2016. Photo by Helen Banks.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266464X2610089X Published online by Cambridge University Press

than as passive subjects, in literary works contribute to improving animal welfare and shifting societal attitudes?

Absolutely. As an observation, I think it's interesting how many children's stories are about animals – *Bambi*, *Watership Down*, *Dumbo*. But in adult work, they are bystanders to the trauma of humans, with notable exceptions like the work of Laline Paull. I think non-fiction work is doing great things to help shift societal attitudes – *Black Fish*, *All That Breathes*. But I also think fiction can do this too and absolutely be a place to improve animal welfare or, at the very least, showcase the agency they deserve.

In the 2016 production of Human Animals, *apart from caged insects, which served as metaphors, no real animals appeared on stage. What are your views on the use of real animals in theatre and performance? Do you think it enhances animal visibility or raises concerns about animal cruelty?*

I think it's all about context. In the UK, there are very strict rules about how animals are treated on stage, and as far as I know, they are quite well protected. Please note I am talking specifically about theatrical stages and not, for example, circus or private animal shows. I think in the theatre, when animals are used, it can highlight how performative the human actors are – and actually, this is not very helpful and can undermine the whole artifice of theatre.

In an interview with Jessie Thompson, you say that 'a play might change the world, or at the very least change a mind'.[2] *And you successfully ignite an awareness about various issues such as gender inequality, violence, migration, and social marginalization through* Roadkill, Nora, *and* Swallow, *among others.* Human Animals, *too, fosters ecological consciousness and explores interspecies relations. Do you think theatre about animals can contribute to conversations about animal rights, conservation, and empathy?*

For me, theatre is a place of empathy, conversation, and sometimes catharsis. I never wish to lecture an audience or tell them how they should feel. But I suppose part of me just wants to show the emotional truth of situations that often go overlooked or underrepresented. I also think I am interested in how we can platform interspecies relations without having to have a human actor play a non-human actor, and this is something I am continuing to explore in my work.

In the play, characters like Jamie and Lisa look at the eyes of animals, and later they become more conscious of animals and begin fighting to protect them. This reminds me of John Berger's idea that modern people lost their connection with animals because they have lost eye contact with them.[3] *Do you see your work as an attempt to restore that connection?*

Yes – nature and the non-human animal world are woven into most of my work. Either by being the present absence (*Girl in the Machine*) or directly (*Human Animals*, *Swallow*). As a species, whether we like it or not, we are inherently tied to the natural world. Our safety depends on it, so we ignore it at our peril; whereas the natural world is entirely indifferent to our survival. So it is up to us to look it in the eye, and I hope my work encourages that and complicates the idea that it is simply us versus them.

In Human Animals, *you refer to the famous Lifeboat Case, adding a witty twist.*[4] *What inspired you to reinterpret this scenario?*

It was a simple way of getting to the root of the argument of the play. It's often quoted by animal rights activists. So it felt plausible to bring it in, and also helpful to the audience.

If you had to choose, who would be cast into the sea?

No comment!

Your play is classified as a 'dystopia' because of the scenario it imagines. Did any specific event or place inspire your play, or is it entirely fictional?

The piece is entirely fictional, but it is inspired by many true events. I think it is interesting

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266464X2610089X Published online by Cambridge University Press

that I wrote it before the Covid pandemic, and yet many of the details rang true during that time. This is partly because humanity has suffered many pandemics through its existence, [and] while the specifics have changed, our attitudes haven't really.

I found the scene where Jamie was feeding the foxes with his own flesh particularly moving. During my research, I came across a Jataka tale in which the Buddha sacrifices his own body to save a starving tiger. I was wondering if you were inspired by this story, or if the resemblance is purely coincidental?

I didn't know this story about the Buddha, so I wasn't inspired by this story. However, a few years prior to writing *Human Animals*, there was a story in America of a man who released his 'pet' exotic animals – including large cats – and then took his own life. It was reported that the animals had also eaten part of him, in what some suspected was an act of self-sacrifice.[5] While this circumstance was different, it definitely stayed with me as an image.

One of the most harrowing and symbolic moments of Human Animals *is the very ending of the play, where pigeons feed on a corpse and gradually become humans. Does this relate to the title of your play? Can you elaborate on this scene a little bit?*

I do not wish to be obtuse, but I've always left the final scene in *Human Animals* open to the interpretation of the audience/reader. It is definitely related to the title and, in a more expressionistic way, to the themes of the play. Other than that, I think the audience/reader will bring their own ideas to it, which I like.

Even though your play does not end catastrophically for people, it can be contended that the ethical issue of the worst-case scenario remains, at least for the animals and nature. Does a shock tactic like this actually accomplish the goal of making viewers understand how serious the changes are, and motivate them to take action against animal cruelty and the impending climate catastrophe?

It's very hard because many of the facts about our impending climate catastrophe are



Figure 2. *Human Animals*, Royal Court Theatre, 2016. Photo by Helen Banks.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266464X2610089X Published online by Cambridge University Press

shocking. I think it's very easy to disengage an audience if you shock them into non-action or silence. But also, it's the reality we are facing. I don't have the answer as to how we change attitudes or promote positive action. I suppose I am just trying to open minds and hearts by showing the emotional truth of the matter. Then, it is the responsibility of the audience to choose what to do with this new information (Figure 2).

Are you planning to engage with animals again in your future works?

I am now writing a play called *XL Bully* – which, amongst other things, looks at the controversy around a very new (and sometimes dangerous) cross-breed of dog. The cross-breeding of this dog has led it to have an incredibly strong kill instinct and has led to many deaths across the UK. There has now been a very strong piece of legislation around the dogs. Rather than looking at the legislation, I'm looking at why people felt the need to 'create' an XL bully in the first place – what it says about humans, and what the implications are for the natural world.

I would like to thank you for this very meaningful piece, for the ones still to come and for taking the time to be part of this interview. I also truly appreciate your work on animals, and your contributions to discussions on animal welfare.

Thank *you*. It was a pleasure.

Afterword

Drawing on Smith's reflections, *Human Animals* can be understood within a broader yet still limited field of animal representation in theatre. Even though animals have long been present on stage and in dramatic texts, the increasing visibility of animal studies remains somewhat constrained in acknowledging animals as autonomous subjects with their own realities, often reducing them to mere metaphors, symbols, or human 'others'. In this respect, the play foregrounds an alternative perspective by resisting purely metaphorical readings and instead offering an animal-centred perspective. By presenting the human, non-human, and the ecological as deeply interconnected and entangled, Smith challenges anthropocentric and speciesist frameworks and invites her audiences to rethink relationality. What is more, *Human Animals* positions theatre as a site of ethical engagement, contributing to the understanding that human and non-human lives are fundamentally entangled. This way, it not only expands the representational possibilities of animals but also opens up space for imagining more inclusive and responsible futures.

Notes and References

1. Stef Smith, *Human Animals* (London: Nick Hern Books, 2016), p. 52.
2. Jessie Thompson, 'Stef Smith interview: "A Doll's House ignited in me a sense of the true radical nature of theatre"', *The Standard*, 7 February 2020, <https://www.standard.co.uk/culture/theatre/stef-smith-interview-nora-a-dolls-house-young-vic-a4355386.html> (accessed 12 November 2025).
3. John Berger, *About Looking* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), p. 26.
4. The Lifeboat Case (*R. v. Dudley and Stephens*) is a renowned legal case commonly used in discussions of law and morality. In 1884, a British yacht sank during a voyage to Australia and four crew members escaped in a lifeboat. As they had no food, they kill and eat the cabin boy, later claiming it was only way to survive. In *Human Animals* Jamie presents a lifeboat scenario in which five survivors – four humans and a dog – can only be saved if one is sacrificed. Lisa immediately says the dog should be thrown overboard because it is an animal. Jamie complicates the situation, suggesting one of the four people is a Nazi and another one is a paedophile, and asks whether this would change the answer.
5. See <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-15393496>, accessed 10 December 2025.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266464X2610089X Published online by Cambridge University Press