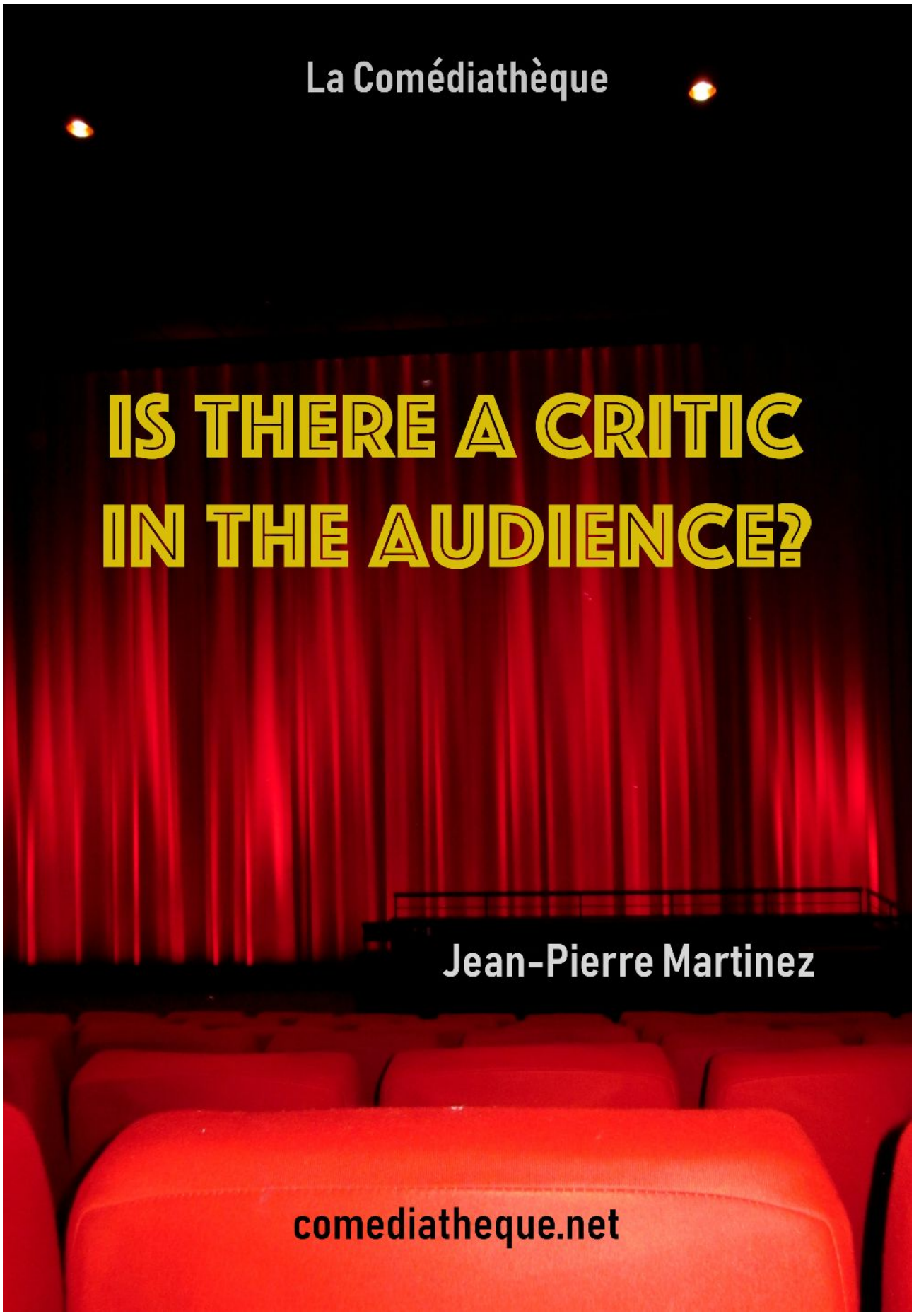

La Comédiathèque
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Jean-Pierre Martinez
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Is There a Critic in the Audience?

Jean-Pierre Martinez

Translation by the author

For Fred and Sam, taking part in the Avignon Festival for the first time is a dream come true. But in Avignon, dreams can quickly become nightmares. After the premiere, a savage review threatens to scare audiences away from a show that was struggling already. On the brink of disaster, these two likeable losers decide, at their own risk, to take drastic action... A tribute to unsung actors in search of a little limelight, and to failure made glorious by passion.

Characters
Sam: actor (male or female)
Fred: actor (male or female)
Dany: theatre critic (male or female)
Max: press agent (male or female)

In this version Fred, Sam and Dany are men and Max is a woman. All four roles can be played by performers of any gender without substantial changes to the dialogue.

This play is set at the Avignon Festival, but it can easily be adapted to other theatre festivals, such as The Edinburgh Festival Fringe.

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Scene 1

An empty stage, apart from two chairs. A fanfare announces the start of a performance in the Cour d'Honneur, the main courtyard of the Palais des Papes (Palace of the Popes) in Avignon. Sam enters, followed by Fred. Sam is carrying a watermelon. They collapse onto the chairs.

Sam – I can't take any more... And the festival doesn't even start until tomorrow...

Fred – You're right, it's hot.

Sam – Hot? It's a blazing 45 degrees in the shade!

Fred – We should make climate-change deniers hand out flyers in Avignon...

Sam takes out a water bottle, drinks, and then hands the bottle to Fred.

Sam – Why do they schedule this in July anyway?

Fred – Probably because that's when most people are on holiday.

Sam – Yeah, well, it won't be a holiday for us.

Fred – Remember? Last July we were taking sailing lessons in Brittany.

Sam – And people say actors on short-term contracts are subsidised layabouts.

Fred *(to the audience)* – Go on, you have a go. You can take our place...

Sam – See if an actor's life is really one long holiday.

Fred – Try handing out flyers to people whose pockets are already stuffed with them...

Sam – Or putting up a poster at the bottom of a drainpipe already covered with posters three storeys high...

Fred – A drainpipe every dog in Avignon has pissed on all year.

Sam – When the local drunks haven't thrown up on it overnight.

Fred – Give it a whirl! Try it for a day or two. You'll see what the artist's life is like.

Sam – Honestly, you'd have to be a real masochist.

Fred – True...

They share a moment, both breaking into broad smiles.

Sam – But we've been dreaming of this for so long...

Fred – It's so awesome. I still can't believe it. The Avignon Festival...

Sam – Until now, we'd only been here as spectators. It's like stepping through the looking glass.

Fred – Let's hope it isn't a mirage... How did the leafleting go?

Sam – Brilliant! A man asked me for free tickets to our opening night.

Fred – What did you tell him?

Sam – I told him that if he brought his girlfriend, we could offer two tickets for the price of one.

Fred – Nicely done.

Sam – Unfortunately, he didn't have a girlfriend...

Fred – And then?

Sam – I just handed him a ticket.

Fred – Alright...

Sam – We have to get word of mouth going somehow.

Fred – That's for sure...

Sam – And how about you with the posters?

Fred – The owner of a bar and tobacconist's wanted two free tickets in exchange for putting our poster in his window.

Sam – What happened next?

Fred – I told him to go screw himself.

Sam – Oh, that's good too.

Fred – It's outrageous. During the festival he'll increase his takings tenfold by legally selling products that cause cancer...

Sam – Meanwhile, we're stuck performing for free...

Fred – It almost makes me want to quit smoking.

Sam – Is that the tobacco shop around the corner?

Fred – Yep.

Sam – Doesn't surprise me. They're charging one euro for tap water during the festival.

Fred – And the toilets are reserved for paying customers only, naturally.

Sam – Some shopkeepers are nice, though. The grocer took a bundle of flyers and gave me a melon.

Fred – That's not a melon. It's a watermelon.

Sam – Oh, right... I did think it was rather large for a melon...

Fred – Come on, let's have faith in it.

Sam – Yeah, but we'll have to hold up...

Fred – Once things get going, the adrenaline will keep us on our feet. *(A pause)* What are we having for lunch?

Sam – I'm not sure... Maybe a watermelon?

Blackout.

Scene 2

Fred enters, practising his diction.

Fred – She sells seashells by the seashore. She sells seashells by the seashore...

Sam enters.

Sam – Six slippery snails slid slowly seaward. Six slippery snails slid slowly seaward...

Fred – So, tonight's the big night?

Sam – I'm terrified. Aren't you?

Fred – The premiere... It's the moment of truth.

Sam – Will the audience like what we've spent over a year preparing for them?

Fred – Standing ovation or just polite applause...

Sam – A few boos, or assorted missiles?

Fred – If only they were tomatoes, we could eat something other than watermelon...

Sam – It's mainly retired teachers and fashionable Parisians at Avignon. They'll be organic tomatoes.

Fred – You're right; we need to stay optimistic.

A pause. Fred looks at his phone.

Sam – But there'll have to be somebody in the audience first. How are bookings looking?

Fred – So far, it's rather quiet.

Sam – I see... So, still no reservations.

Fred – Except for that guy you gave a ticket to. But it's Avignon; people don't usually book in advance! They just show up at the theatre.

Sam looks around.

Sam – A theatre? You'd have to know this was one. How on earth did they squeeze forty-nine seats in here?

Fred – By eliminating the backstage area, for starters.

Sam – It's not any bigger than the kebab shop we ate at yesterday. What is this place during the rest of the year?

Fred – A kebab shop. Didn't you see the sign above the door, next to the theatre sign?

Sam – Alright... So that's the source of this smell...

Fred – That smell of old cooking fat really lingers...

Sam – So we've rented ourselves a kebab shop for three weeks...

Fred – Yeah...

Sam – And all for the modest sum of...?

Fred – 12,000 euros.

Sam – 12,000 euros...

Fred – And they don't even throw in free kebabs...

Sam – The magic of Avignon...

Fred – Well, it also includes the accommodation just upstairs.

Sam – The accommodation... That tiny room with no air conditioning... with the shared shower on the landing.

Fred – At least there are toilets. I heard that's not the case everywhere...

Sam *(looking at a flyer)* – "Double or Nothing?" We chose the right title for our show. We've put all our savings into the festival. Either it launches our careers...

Fred – Or brings them to an early end.

Sam – I did the math. Just to break even, we would need to sell out every performance from start to finish.

Fred – And even then... Luckily, we don't take anything ourselves. Apart from the odd amphetamine tablet, that is...

Sam – Yeah, but there are also posters and flyers.

Fred – Not to mention the press agent...

Sam – Speaking of whom, there she is...

Scene 3

Max, the press agent, enters. She is a cheerful woman dressed somewhat eccentrically.

Max – How are we doing, my darlings?

Fred – We were just chatting about you.

Max – Already missing me, are you?

Sam – We were saying you're expensive.

Max – I'm the cheapest press agent in the business!

Fred – Unfortunately, not necessarily the best.

Sam – We're counting on you to fill the seats, Max. Otherwise, it's bankruptcy...

Max – You don't come to Avignon to make money, you know.

Fred – Is that so?

Sam – If we could at least avoid losing money.

Fred – Then why exactly have we come to Avignon?

Max – Think of it as an investment! You need to attract theatre programmers.

Sam – Programmers? Have many of them announced their attendance?

Max – Not yet. But it's the first day, it will come... The streets of Avignon are bustling!

Sam – Yes, but there are over 1500 shows...

Max – The theatre is tiny. With fifteen spectators you've almost filled half the seats!

Fred – We still need to find those 15 spectators...

Sam – We've been handing out flyers all day and we still haven't got a single booking...

Max – Honestly, you don't have many cards in your favour...

Fred – Thanks... It's heartening to know our press agent has faith in us.

Max – Let's be realistic... You wrote the script yourselves, you're not famous actors, you're not performing in a big theatre...

Fred – We're performing in a kebab shop...

Max – You're not getting any media attention...

Sam – Well, that's why we enlisted a press agent, isn't it?

Max – Of course... But I can't work miracles either...

Fred – We were hoping for a small miracle at this price.

Max – And the theme of the play isn't exactly a crowd-pleaser either.

Sam – Theme? I didn't even know our play had a subject.

Fred – So, what's a crowd-pleasing subject these days?

Max – I don't know. Migrants. Domestic violence. Nazism...

Sam – Nazism is a current topic?

Max – Some subjects are timeless, you know. If only you were Jewish or Armenian...

Fred – Sorry. My mother's Greek, and my father had an Italian friend...

Max – No, with a show like yours, the only solution is for the actors to be somewhat famous. Have either of you ever been in a TV soap opera?

Sam – No...

Fred – I did a health-insurance advert two years ago, but you could only see me from behind...

Sam – So, do you know the secret to becoming famous actors?

Max – By tonight? Unless you kill somebody...

Fred – Strangling our press agent on opening night would certainly make us famous...

Max – I'll leave you to your preparations... But let's stay positive! There's always room for a pleasant surprise...

Max exits.

Scene 4

Sam – She's right. Perhaps we should have chosen a play... written by someone who actually knows how.

Fred – And hand over an extra 10% in royalties?

Sam – Or a playwright who's six feet under...

Fred – At least seventy years ago. Otherwise you'd still have to pay royalties to the heirs.

Sam – True, we're already shelling out for the venue, posters, and the press agent... Adding an author's fee might break the bank!

Fred – And why not pay the actors too?

Sam's phone rings, and he answers the call.

Sam – Hello, Mum... Yes, yes, everything's fine... Yes, we've already got quite a few bookings, and... Thanks, yes... Thanks... Sorry, I have to go, I've got another call... Yes, probably another booking... Speak soon...

He puts his phone away.

Fred – Your mother...?

Sam – My mother... She lent us 10,000 euros; it's understandable, she's a bit worried...

Fred – You should've repeated what our press agent just told us: you don't come to Avignon to make money...

Sam – True; she won't be getting her 10,000 euros back anytime soon.

Fred looks at the poster for their show, "Double or Nothing?", featuring their photographs.

Fred – This poster's really awful...

Sam – Yeah...

Fred – Maybe we should've invested in a graphic designer.

Sam – Do you have any idea how much a graphic designer costs?

Fred – I know what it'll cost us if the show flops...

Sam – Speaking of the posters... This morning, the mistral wind swept away all the ones we hung up overnight.

Fred – Well, at least it saved us from fines for putting them in prohibited spots.

Sam – It's still strange, isn't it? The festival wouldn't exist without us. We're the only ones not raking in the cash, yet we're seen as a nuisance...

Fred – Yeah... Polluters... Even delinquents...

Sam – Especially small companies like us, without any subsidies.

Fred – And yet the OFF fringe sells twenty times more tickets than the official IN festival...

Sam – It's not thanks to us; we haven't sold a single one ourselves, but still...

Fred checks his phone.

Fred – Ah, we just received a reservation...

Sam – Great!

Fred – It's that man you gave a free ticket to. He wants to reserve another seat.

Sam – Did he find a girlfriend?

Fred – No, but he's bringing his grandma. He's asking if there's a senior discount...

A pause.

Fred – I'm starting to wonder if hiring a press agent was a wise move because up to now...

Sam – With the money we're giving her...

Fred – We should have chosen a press agent who's been dead for seventy years.

A pause. Fred checks his phone, looking concerned.

Sam – What's the matter...?

Fred – Nothing, it's just Alex...

Sam – She hasn't shown up yet? You told me she'd be here for the premiere...

Fred – Yeah...

Sam – Is there an issue?

Fred – Seems like a last-minute complication... She should be here in a few days...

Scene 5

The press agent returns with a big smile on her face.

Max – I told you to trust me! Good news: Daniel Puddington is coming to the show tonight.

Sam – Daniel Puddington?

Fred – Who is that?

Max – Puddington! The critic from *Provence Matin*!

Sam – Fantastic...

Max – You don't understand! Everyone dreams of a recommendation from Daniel Puddington. If he likes the show and writes about it, it could launch your careers!

Sam – No, no, we're very happy.

Fred – It just adds a bit of pressure. We'll have to deliver...

Sam – To start with, we'll have to make sure the critic isn't the only one in the audience.

Fred – We'll get back to handing out flyers and maybe give away some tickets.

Sam – Isn't it a bit late for that? We're performing in two hours...

Max – Don't worry. I might have a solution...

Fred – Oh, really?

Max – I can bring in a group of 30.

Sam – No?

Fred – A group of 30?

Max – A class of trainee plumbers from a vocational school in Avignon. I know the head teacher.

Sam – Alright...

Max – Of course, you'll have to invite them.

Fred – Of course...

Max – So? Who do you owe this one to?

Sam and Fred display a somewhat forced smile.

Blackout.

Scene 6

Sam and Fred arrive, exhilarated.

Sam – So?

Fred – We did well, didn't we?

Sam – I believe so.

Fred – Apart from the five lines you skipped at the end.

Sam – Hang on! You missed a cue just before that...

Fred – Finally, we made up for it.

Sam – I'm sure the audience didn't notice.

Fred – These little hiccups give live performances character, don't they?

Sam – Nonetheless, a full house for our first show is a promising sign.

Fred – Even with those complimentary tickets...

Sam – We have to admit that our press agent did a great job on this one.

Fred – But the audience didn't seem very engaged, did they?

Sam – They didn't even applaud at the end.

Fred – Yeah, that's odd... They seemed happy, though.

Sam – They just waved their hands like this.

He waves both hands above his head, like a puppet.

Fred – What about the critic?

Sam – Who knows... but I'd say he liked it, right?

Fred – He was in the front row. I saw him taking notes throughout the performance.

Sam – I found it quite unnerving, actually... It was like sitting an oral exam at school all over again... which I failed, by the way.

Fred – He left very quickly after the show.

Sam – He probably had another performance to attend right after ours.

Scene 7

Max enters.

Max – Hey there, folks! How's it going?

Fred – Great!

Sam – Has Daniel Puddington said anything about us yet?

Max – Dany? I just bumped into him, actually.

Fred – So, how did he find the show?

Max – It was a quick chat; he was in a rush. But he assured me he'd write a review very soon.

Sam – A review in *Provence Matin* could really help us.

Fred – Imagine putting an endorsement from Daniel Puddington outside the theatre...

Max – And you'll be pleased to know the younger crowd absolutely loved it.

Sam – Oh really? That's strange; there wasn't any applause at the end...

Fred – Yeah, they just waved their hands above their heads like this.

He imitates the gesture again.

Max – Oh, no, that's just their way of applauding.

Sam – Is that how young people applaud these days?

Max – Deaf people do, at least.

Fred – Deaf...?

Max – Yes. They were all deaf.

Sam – I thought you said they were studying plumbing.

Max – They were. It's a specialist vocational school.

Fred – So how did they understand the play?

Max – They can lip-read. When you're facing the audience, of course...

Sam – Deaf students...

Fred – So much for word of mouth...

Sam – Fantastic...

Max – Well, you didn't choose the easiest route either. The 11:00 PM slot is not very convenient...

Fred – It was the only one available.

Sam – And the cheapest.

Max – Yes... one wonders why...

Fred – On the other hand, being the last show of the night means we don't have to rush to pack up the props.

Max – Props? There are only two chairs...

Sam – And above all, we can sleep on the stage after the performance... it's so hot up there...

Fred – Do you have air conditioning?

Max – I have a villa with a pool in a nearby village.

Sam – Maybe we should have become press agents instead of actors.

Max – But you're the ones in the spotlight, my darlings! The ones everyone applauds!

Fred – Depends on the audience. Who have you found to clap for us tonight? People with their hands in plaster?

Max – You should write a play about that someday. I'm sure that one would be a hit.

Sam – About what?

Max – The trials and tribulations of a small company, tackling Avignon for the first time with a not-so-great show.

Fred – Thanks, we'll keep that in mind for next year...

Max – When I can help...

Fred – What about the theatre programmers?

Max – Actually, one is attending tonight.

Sam – Really? Who is it?

Max – He's... the programming director for the parish hall in Camembert.

Fred – Camembert? Where's that?

Max – It's in Normandy...

Sam – The parish hall in Camembert...

Fred – Lovely...

Max – It's a start. A good review from Daniel Puddington should bring in other programmers...

Blackout.

Scene 8

Fred is there, dozing in one of the chairs. Sam arrives with a newspaper in hand. Fred stirs from his drowsiness.

Sam – I bought the newspaper.

Fred – Has the review been published?

Sam – I didn't have time to check. I took the opportunity to hand out flyers on my way back...

He sits in the other chair and flips through the newspaper.

Fred – So, what's the verdict?

Sam – I don't see anything... Oh wait, it's on page three...

Fred – Great!

Sam – Our first review.

Fred – What does it say?

Sam *(reading)* – "Theatre in a Kebab Shop". That's the headline...

Fred – That's quite amusing.

Sam *(reading)* – "A comedy performed in a kebab shop: a concept with something to tempt die-hard followers of the Avignon OFF. Great shows can indeed happen in the smallest venues. Sadly, the play we saw yesterday is to theatre what a kebab is to French gastronomy: both tasteless and hard to digest..."

Fred – Is that all?

Sam reads a bit more in silence before looking up from the newspaper.

Sam – It continues like this for a few lines, but I think you get the general idea...

Fred – Yeah...

Sam *(reading)* – It ends: "You leave this greasy show feeling distinctly queasy, your clothes reeking of rancid frying oil..."

Sam and Fred are devastated.

Fred – The bastard...

Sam – Our show is called "Double or Nothing?". I think we have our answer...

Fred – Come on, we're not giving up on day one. It's just one critic's opinion. A frustrated failure who's never created anything himself, and takes delight in tearing down other people's work...

Sam – We've given everything to make it to Avignon. I even had to part with my stamp collection...

Fred – Well, on the bright side, we're getting some press coverage...

Sam – I could've done without this kind of article.

Fred *(rereading)* – "You leave this greasy show feeling distinctly queasy, your clothes reeking of rancid frying oil..."

Sam – It's well-written, I'll give them that...

Fred – We already had no reservations, and this will scare off the audience!

Sam – So... what do we do now?

Fred – What do you suggest? Buy up every copy of *Provence Matin* before festival-goers can read this hatchet job?

Sam – Right now, I'm trying to resist the temptation to jump into the Rhône River...

Fred – I'd rather go strangle the jerk who wrote this.

Sam – Handing out flyers in this heat was difficult enough. Now we're completely finished...

Scene 9

The press agent arrives, just as cheerful as ever.

Max – How's it going, folks?

Fred – She's asking if we're doing okay...

Max – What's the matter?

Sam – No, things are not going well at all.

Fred – Did you see Puddington's review in *Var Matin*?

Max – *Provence Matin*.

Sam – Yes, well, that's not the issue, is it?

Max – At least they're talking about you in the newspaper! Isn't that what you wanted?

Fred – Is that all you have to say to us?

Sam – So, this is what we're paying you for? To get crappy reviews?

Max – Hey, hold on, you haven't paid me yet, okay? And my job is to get journalists to come. I can't guarantee that the reviews will always be good.

Fred – I see... So that's the premium option...

Sam – We were counting on this article to bring in an audience. With a review like this on the first day, we're doomed!

Max – It's just one critic's opinion. You might get better reviews.

Fred – Do you think so?

Max – And you know, in Avignon, there are also shows that play to full houses with bad reviews.

Sam – Oh yeah? Like which ones, for example?

Max – Right now, I can't think of any, but... there must be some.

Fred – So you're a press agent, and you're explaining to us that reviews are pointless?

Max – It's just *Provence Matin*, you know...

Sam – What were you hoping for? A critic from *Le Monde* or *Le Figaro*?

Max – Honestly... I'm not sure that would be doing you a favour...

Fred – Well... What do we do now?

Sam – Yesterday, you said that to become famous, all you needed to do was murder someone. Well, I feel like we're the ones who got killed.

Fred – Yeah... It makes me feel murderous, too.

Sam – It’s true that killing a critic could give us some visibility.

Fred’s phone rings, and he answers.

Fred – Yes, Alex, how are you...? Yes...? Oh, really...?

He exits.

Scene 10

Max – Your friend's on edge, isn't he?

Sam – We've put everything into this festival, and things aren't going well with his girlfriend either. This review was the final straw...

Max – Well... Bad reviews happen... There will be more...

Sam – More? You mean... ones that are better.

Max – Or worse, who knows... In this business, you have to learn to take it...

Sam – We'd rather take payments. So far, there's nothing in the till.

Max – Come on, I'm sure things will take off. The first week at Avignon is always difficult.

Sam – And I hear the last week is deserted. Since the festival only lasts three weeks...

Max – That leaves you the middle week! Sorry, I must go. I have a meeting with a journalist... I'll try to get them here tomorrow, but it's not easy. During the festival, journalists are in great demand...

Max exits.

Scene 11

Fred returns, looking disheartened.

Sam – How's it going?

Fred – Alex won't be coming...

Sam – No...?

Fred – She just dumped me, actually...

Sam – Ah, damn... But why?

Fred – Maybe because she doesn't want to spend her holiday with a loser like me... and his buddy. In a three-square-meter room without air conditioning...

Sam – Oh, that sucks... Especially since she was supposed to help us hand out flyers...

Fred – Her ex invited her to spend the summer in his parents' villa in Corsica.

Sam – Of course... it's hard to compete...

Fred takes Provence Matin *and turns to the page with the review.*

Fred – I sacrificed everything to do this festival. And that bastard assassinated us on the first day.

Sam – Yeah... that sucks, too...

Fred throws the newspaper.

Fred – We're not going to let this slide!

Sam – What do you want us to do?

Fred – We're going to pull off something huge! Do you believe in me?

Sam looks at him with a worried expression.

Blackout.

Scene 12

Sam and Fred wear theatre masks. Daniel Puddington, the critic, is tied to a chair, gagged and blindfolded. Sam stays calm; Fred becomes increasingly agitated.

Sam – Kidnapping a journalist over a bad review... Is it a bit excessive, don't you think?

Fred – No, it's not just a bad review; it's a real assassination!

Sam – An assassination...

Fred – I see it as self-defence.

Sam – I guess...

Fred – But you don't understand! We were already unsure about breaking even with three weeks of sold-out shows. Now, with a review like that, we're guaranteed an empty house!

Sam – There's still word of mouth.

Fred – Word of mouth? From a whole class of deaf students?

Sam – Well, when you put it that way...

Fred – This guy just handed us a death sentence, believe me... Avignon is done for us! And if we can't figure out how to bounce back, it might spell the end of our acting careers as well.

Sam – That's not untrue...

Fred – To him it's a few nasty lines in a local paper. To us it's a death sentence!

Sam – Okay, but let's not get carried away, alright? You're pretty worked up at the moment.

Fred – Fine, I'll try to calm down...

Sam – Good... And now, what do we do with him?

The critic desperately tries to speak through his gag. Sam and Fred exchange a glance.

Fred – Well, silencing a critic is a start.

Sam – We wouldn't want him to choke, either.

Fred – If we remove his gag and he starts screaming, we'll be in hot water.

Sam – On the other hand, theatres are well soundproofed.

Fred – You're right... If bystanders hear someone screaming, they'll think it's part of the play.

Sam – And if we need to negotiate something with him, we have to let him talk.

Fred – Alright, let's give him a chance to speak.

Fred removes Dany's gag.

Dany – You guys are completely crazy! And who are you, by the way?

Sam – We're wearing masks, idiot. Do you think we'll tell you?

Dany – But seriously, what do you want from me? If this is about a ransom, you'll be disappointed. I have almost nothing in my bank account. And no one will pay anything to free me. I'm single and childless.

Fred – Well, that's not surprising. Most critics end up as bitter old bachelors.

Dany – So you know I'm a critic. So you must also know we don't make a fortune in this job. Especially not in a regional newspaper...

Sam – It's not your money we're interested in.

Dany – Oh yeah? Why did you kidnap me, then?

Fred – You have any idea?

Dany – No...

Sam – Your work... Let's talk about that. Is that what people pay you for? To discourage young actors trying to get started? To ruin small companies who've invested all their savings in their first Avignon?

Fred – And you expect us to stand by without saying a word...

Dany – Ah, so that's what this is about. But are you part of some collective? The armed wing of the OFF's worst shows? Or are you acting in a personal capacity?

Sam – The OFF's worst shows, eh?

Fred – Such contempt...

Sam – Fine, our show is still finding its feet. But have you ever taken the risk of creating something yourself? Of investing the little money you have in a dream?

Fred – Do you still have any dreams, Mr Puddington? Or is your only pleasure in life stopping other people from making theirs come true?

Dany – Aren't you slipping into a bit of a cliché here? The bitter critic who gets his only pleasure from running down people who actually do something with their lives?

Fred – Are you really sure it's a cliché?

Dany – I also praise and wholeheartedly recommend some shows...

Sam – Oh really?

Dany – My role is to spare audiences from disappointing experiences and guide them towards performances that truly deserve their support.

Sam – And naturally, your opinion is the only one that matters.

Dany – It's simply an opinion. No one is obliged to share it.

Fred – Except you write for a newspaper. When you tear a show down, it has concrete consequences, and not just on the egos of the actors...

Dany – A show? What show?

Sam – It doesn't matter.

Dany – And by the way, where are we?

Fred – You think we're going to tell you? You must really think we're idiots...

Dany – I've reviewed just two or three shows since the festival started....

Sam – And I imagine you torpedoed all three of them.

Dany – This place seems familiar...

Fred – You have a blindfold on!

Dany – It's this scent... A nauseating scent... A scent... of kebab!

Sam – Not at all...

Dany – Yes, it's you! "Double or Nothing"!

Fred – Not at all...

Dany – You guys are seriously insane.

Sam removes the blindfold from Dany's eyes. Sam and Fred take off their masks.

Sam – Okay, it's us...

Dany – But what do you want exactly?

Sam and Fred exchange a glance.

Fred – I don't know...

Dany – You don't actually believe that kidnapping me will make me revise my review to endorse your show, do you?

Sam – It would be a good beginning...

Dany – And how do you think you'll force me? Through violence?

Fred and Sam exchange a dubious look.

Fred – We haven't figured that part out yet...

Dany – Your show is awful. I'd rather die than write otherwise.

Sam – So you'd choose death over reconsidering your words?

Dany – I doubt you're crazy enough to kill me over a bad review.

Fred – Who knows? You called us complete lunatics a moment ago...

Sam – At the very least, we could keep you confined for the duration of the festival, preventing you from harming other theatre companies...

Dany – People will notice I'm missing. The police will start an investigation.

Fred – You said nobody cared about you. Do you think anyone will miss you?

Dany – And we're on a theatre stage. There'll be another show here tomorrow morning. You can't keep me here.

Sam – You can have our luxury suite upstairs. You'll discover how actors really live at the festival when they're not in the spotlight.

Fred – You'll see... It's not much larger than a sauna cabin, and it's even hotter...

Sam – Yet it costs us a fortune...

Fred – While you're paid to write your venomous reviews in the comfort of an air-conditioned office.

Sam looks at Fred with a dubious expression.

Sam – Venomous?

Fred – We'll give you the night to think about it...

Blackout.

Scene 13

Sam and Fred are seated, both looking disheartened. Dany has vanished.

Sam – I'm starting to think we let our emotions get the best of us...

Fred – You think so...?

Sam – Perhaps we should consider letting him go now.

Fred – He knows who we are. He'll rush to the police to report us, and we'll spend the festival in jail.

Sam – Any other ideas?

Fred – I don't know... Get rid of him...?

Sam – Let's just pretend you didn't say that.

Fred – So what's the plan?

Sam – We could keep him here for a few more days while we brainstorm.

Fred – Brainstorm about what?

Sam – We could try to persuade him to change his mind.

Fred – About our show?

Sam – Why not?

Fred – Did you hear him? He won't budge!

Sam – We have to admit he's quite stubborn.

Fred – Yeah... It surprises me, actually... I didn't think a critic would be willing to die for his ideas...

Sam – In that case, it's better to release him... The longer we wait, the worse our situation becomes...

Fred – I don't know...

Sam – If we apologise and offer him some money, perhaps he'll agree not to press charges.

Fred – Money?

Sam – You're right... We can't even afford to eat. I'm getting hungry, by the way.

Fred – So...?

Sam – He told us he lives alone. No one has noticed his disappearance yet. Let's free him right away...

Fred – If he accuses us of kidnapping him, we can always deny it.

Sam – We'll say he's making it all up.

Fred – Kidnapping a critic... How foolish would actors have to be to do something like that?

Sam – And besides, there are no witnesses.

Their gazes turn towards the audience.

Scene 14

The press agent arrives.

Max – Have you heard the news?

Fred – What news?

Max – The critic from *Provence Matin*. He's disappeared!

Sam – Vanished?

Fred – Daniel Puddington?

Sam – Seriously?

Max – He didn't show up at his office this morning, and he didn't submit the latest review for the show he attended last night.

Fred – The theatre company must be relieved...

Sam – Maybe he took a few days off...

Max – In the middle of the festival? Besides, a café owner in Rue des Teinturiers found the little squared notebook he takes notes in during performances.

Fred – No?

Max – It was floating in the Sorgue.

Sam – Puddington?

Max – The notebook!

Fred – Perhaps he committed suicide...

Max – The notebook?

Fred – Puddington!

Max – You're among the last ones to have seen him. Did he look depressed after leaving your show?

Sam – He looked normal... For a critic...

Fred – It's always hard to distinguish between a normal critic and a depressed one.

Max – I hope he didn't commit suicide right after seeing your show. That wouldn't be good publicity.

Sam – That's for sure...

Max – Then again, committing suicide by jumping into the Sorgue...

Fred – Yeah... It's two meters wide and fifty centimetres deep.

Sam – While there's the Rhône right next to it.

Max – Or maybe he was kidnapped.

Fred – No?

Sam – This story is incredible.

Fred – Who could possibly have the idea to kidnap a critic?

Sam – Yes, it's really insane...

Max – The police are investigating. They might come to question you.

Sam – Us? Why us?

Max – Your show was the last one he critiqued, and it wasn't a favourable review...

Fred – The police should focus on the theatre owners who rent a kebab shop for 12,000 euros for three weeks. And put them in jail.

Sam – Some even rent chapels, I've heard.

Fred – Jesus chased the merchants from the Temple. These days in Avignon, the merchants buy up churches and rent them out for a fortune during the festival.

Max – Well, excuse me, but I have other companies waiting for me.

Max leaves.

Scene 15

Awkward moment.

Sam – Why didn't we confess to her?

Fred – When she brought up the police, I got flustered.

Sam – I know what you mean. I felt like a kid caught torturing a cat.

Fred – Have you ever tortured a cat?

Sam – It's just an expression.

Fred – So, now that we're on their radar, it'll be tougher to plead innocence.

Sam – You're right. So, what do we do with Puddington?

Fred – Apparently you can dissolve a body with acid overnight and wash it down the bath drain.

Sam – Yeah, but there's a hitch.

Fred – What's that?

Sam – We don't have a bathtub...

They pause, racking their brains.

Fred – We have a toilet...

Silence.

Sam – Whose crazy idea was it to participate in the Avignon Festival?

Fred – I believe it was you.

Sam – Are you absolutely sure?

Fred – I don't know why, but I had a bad feeling about this...

Sam – What's for certain is that you suggested kidnapping a critic.

Fred gets up to leave.

Sam – Where are you off to?

Fred – If we're going to get him down the toilet, we'll need a few tools.

Sam – There's a hardware shop Fixorama next door. They're very nice. They even took a poster...

They leave.

Scene 16

The critic is tied to a chair. Fred and Sam enter.

Dany – Do you know the penalty for kidnapping and false imprisonment?

Sam – Not really. How much are we talking about?

Dany – I'm not entirely sure, but it's probably many years in prison...

Fred – All you need to do is follow our instructions, and we'll release you.

Dany – Publish a correction to claim I love your show now? Never!

Sam – Do you realize the sacrifices actors make to come to Avignon? Especially when they have no subsidies...

Dany – No one's compelling you to participate in Avignon. It would be a public service to abstain...

Fred – I'm going to kill him...

Sam – At least we'll get some media coverage.

Dany – You guys are crazy, but I doubt you're crazy enough to go through with something like this.

Fred – I can see tomorrow's headline in *Provence Matin*: "Actors Furious Over Bad Review Kidnap Journalist, Cut Him Up and Flush Him Down Toilet."

Dany – That would certainly make you famous. In prison...!

Sam – And if we manage to pull this off without getting caught...?

Dany – In that case, you won't make the headlines!

Fred – Yes, that's not entirely untrue.

Sam – How do we resolve this dilemma...?

Dany – You guys are totally idiotic! Your show is terrible!

Fred – He's getting on my nerves, what about you?

Sam – You're right. We'll have to get rid of him.

Fred – I'll get the tools I bought at Fixorama. They had a special offer on power saws.

Sam – I'll come along. We'll also need some large bin bags.

The critic listens, obviously horrified.

Dany – Please tell me this is a joke...? You're not really going through with this...?

Fred – Put his gag back on.

Sam gags the critic.

Fred – Seems it's not so hard to silence a critic. You just have to gag him...

The critic makes muffled protests as they exit.

Scene 17

The press agent returns and steps to the front of the stage without seeing the critic tied to one of the chairs.

Max – Fred? Sam? I've got some exciting news for you, guys! *(She scans the room)* Where have those two idiots run off to...?

Behind her, the critic tries to get his voice through the gag.

Dany – Mmmm...

Max doesn't hear him.

Max *(to the audience)* – Have you seen those two clowns? *(She can improvise a little in the style of a puppet show, depending on audience reactions.)* They seemed odd last time, didn't they? Have you noticed anything unusual?

Dany – Mmmm...

Max turns and sees the critic.

Max – Puddington? What are you doing here?

Dany – Mmmm...

Max – But speak clearly, my old friend; I can't understand a word you're saying!

Dany – Mmmm...

Max – Oh, I see... *(She takes off his gag.)* Everyone's looking for you, Puddington! We thought you'd drowned in the Sorgue!

Dany – These two lunatics kidnapped me and are holding me here...

Max – Kidnapping? But why...?

Dany – I'll explain later; we need to leave right now! They'll be back any moment; they went to get some tools...!

Max – Tools?

Dany – Untie me, I'm telling you!

Max – OK, OK... No need to get worked up...

She tries to untie him but is clearly struggling.

Dany – What on earth are you doing?

Max – What kind of knot is this...? The person who tied this must have been a sailor; it's impossible...

Dany – Don't you have a knife?

Max – No, sorry... I don't go around Avignon carrying a knife...

Dany – Perhaps I should apply for a gun licence. Being a critic is a dangerous business...

Scene 18

Sam and Fred return, visibly embarrassed to see that Max has discovered their hostage.

Sam – Max? We weren't expecting you so soon...

Max – I came to say that the critic from Libre Théâtre, a theatre website, is coming tonight.

Fred – Great...

Max – But I have to admit, I'm having second thoughts now. You guys are crazy! Kidnapping a journalist? We're not in Russia!

Sam – We got carried away, it's true.

Max – Just a bit?

Fred – Did you read his article?

Max – Release him immediately. There might still be time to calm things down if you apologize...

Fred – Apologize? No way!

Dany – You won't get out of this with apologies, believe me. I'm going straight to the police to file a complaint. Untie me!

Sam – See, we can't let him go.

Fred – He just said it: he's going to tell the police everything.

Max – In any case, I don't want to be involved in this.

Sam – It's all your fault anyway. You're a lousy press agent!

Dany – But it's your show that's lousy!

Max – Puddington's right. I've done this job for years, and yours is the worst show I've ever seen! Even the critic from Libre Théâtre didn't want to come. I had to promise him dinner... and perhaps more.

Dany – See? Even your press agent agrees with me. You guys are awful!

Max – I'm calling the police.

Max takes out her phone. Sam turns to Fred with a questioning look.

Fred – We have no choice...

Blackout.

Scene 19

Max is tied to a chair and gagged beside Dany, who is still tied up.

Sam – If this continues, we're going to need more space...

Fred – Yeah, because I'd like to take the guy who rented us this rat hole hostage too.

Sam – And I'm not just saying it, believe me... This morning, I saw two rats come out from under the bed and cross the hallway to get to the toilet.

Fred – There are more rats than spectators in this theatre...

Sam – And what about the press agent?

Fred – We couldn't let her call the police.

Sam – Yeah, but now, what's the plan? *(His phone rings, and he answers)* Yes, Mum... Yes, the first one went really well; we had a full house. Word of mouth is starting to work... If everything goes well, I think we'll be able to pay you back... Well, you know, we already have our first review... In *Provence Matin*, yes... Okay, I'll send it to you... Sure... I need to go; we're with the press agent and a journalist right now... That's right, for an interview... Thanks... Love you too...

He puts his phone away.

Fred – We need to make a decision...

Sam – They don't seem to be moving anymore...

Fred – They're not dead, are they?

Sounds of snoring.

Sam – Oh no, they're sleeping...

Fred – All this aside, we'll still have to go and distribute flyers.

Sam – It's not thanks to them that we'll fill the seats...

They exit.

Scene 20

Dany and Max regain their senses and exchange a look.

Dany – Max? So, you too...

Max – I knew they were a bit goofy, but not to this extent...

Dany – A bit goofy? They're psychopaths! They went to Fixorama to buy saws to cut us into pieces!

Max – Fixorama? Oh right... They've got some special offers on at the moment...

Dany – If you hadn't taken so long to untie me earlier...

Max – So now it's my fault! You're the one who provoked them with that scathing review in *Provence Matin*.

Dany – But their show is dreadful!

Max – It's their first Avignon Festival...

Dany – I hope for the audience's sake it's their last.

Max – Okay, they're not great, but they're eager to improve. You have to give them credit for their enthusiasm...

Dany – In a strange way, I admire you. Because defending shows like this can't be easy every day. Why do you even do this job?

Max – Well, what can I say... I have a soft spot for the underdogs. Sure, they lack talent, but they're at least following their passion.

Dany – It'd be nice if they pursued a different passion, especially...

Max – Don't be too harsh on them. They're like kids, you know. All actors do this job to hear the applause, to be told they're loved.

Dany – I still can't bring myself to call it a good show! Just to make them feel better...

Max – No, of course not... But some words can cut deeper than others. For you, it's just a negative review. For them, it's their entire world on the line...

Dany – For now, we have to save our own skins! Because if we're still here in five minutes...

Max – You're absolutely right. We'd better go... I have other tasks to attend to...

Dany – At least we should be able to free ourselves. *(He attempts to untie himself with some acrobatics)* I'll give them credit for one thing: they certainly know how to tie a knot...

The press agent looks at the audience.

Max – Let's ask them.

Dany – Ask them...? Ask who?

Max – The audience!

Dany *(whispering)* – But that's the fourth wall... We're not supposed to talk to the audience.

Max – This is experimental theatre! We're breaking every convention. Anything goes!

Dany – You think?

Max – Do you want to get out of here or not?

Dany – Okay...

Max – Hey!

Dany – Can someone come and untie us?

Max – Is there a sailor in the audience?

If someone accepts, a little improvisation. Otherwise, it's the press agent who manages to untie herself and free the other hostage.

Dany – Free at last!

Max – I was a press agent. Now I'm a free agent!

Dany – Very funny... You should try stand-up comedy...

Max – Let's get out of here before those two lunatics come back...

Dany turns to the audience.

Dany – See, I warned you not to come and see this show! You should read the reviews in the newspapers, right? Or else, don't complain later...

They exit.

Scene 21

Sam and Fred return. Fred is carrying Provence Matin.

Sam – Another glowing review of our show in the press?

Fred – They're reporting Puddington's disappearance...

Sam – So what?

Fred – The abduction angle has been confirmed.

Sam – OK...

Fred *(reading)* – "Festival-goers claimed to have witnessed two men wearing theatre masks forcing the famous critic into a van."

Sam – It looks like the net is closing in, doesn't it...

Fred – No...

Sam – What now?

Fred *(reading)* – "The kidnappers are demanding a ransom of ten thousand euros..."

Sam – Is this some kind of prank?

Fred – It's probably a struggling theatre company attempting to recover their expenses this way.

Sam – This is insane... Nobody knows us, and there are already actors pretending to be us.

Fred – 10,000 euros... Or maybe it's your mother trying to get back the money she lent us.

Sam realizes that the critic and the press agent have disappeared.

Sam – Did you put the hostages up there before leaving?

Fred – No...

Sam – Then they must have escaped...

Fred – But I tied those sailor's knots...

Sam – Just like the ones we learned during that sailing course last summer in Brittany...

Fred – I wonder who managed to untie them.

Sam – I haven't a clue either...

They cast a suspicious glance at the audience.

Fred – They're probably at the police station right now, filing a complaint.

Sam – Kidnapping and hostage-taking...

Fred – Tonight, we'll sleep in prison...

Sam – Indeed... But it's showtime now. Let's at least try to finish on a high note...

They exit.

Blackout.

Scene 22

Sam and Fred arrive, very excited.

Fred – We were even better than last time, right?

Sam – Yeah... I think I even heard one or two people applauding at the end.

Fred – And one person got up, did you see?

Sam – Maybe it was to leave faster, but still...

Fred – Since there were only three spectators in the audience, two who clapped, and one who got up, it's almost a standing ovation...

Their mood darkens.

Fred – The police aren't here yet.

Sam – It shouldn't be much longer.

Fred – We'll have to issue a press release to announce the premature end of the show...

Sam – Out of respect for our audience...

Fred – It would be a shame if spectators lined up outside the theatre for nothing.

A moment of dejection.

Sam – We should look on the bright side... At least we won't have to hand out flyers in 45-degree heat.

Fred – In the shade... That's where we'll be spending the rest of the summer. Behind bars.

Sam – A prison cell can't be worse than that broom closet up there in the attic.

Fred – Do you think they have air conditioning in prison?

Sam – It's probably optional, like in hospitals.

Fred – Anyway, for us, Avignon is over...

Sam checks his phone.

Sam – Too bad... You'll laugh, but against all odds, we had a few bookings for tomorrow.

Fred – After all, as long as the police don't come to arrest us, we can keep performing... The show must go on...

Sam – The police bursting in and handcuffing us mid-performance... Now that would be a dramatic finale.

Fred – I hear someone; it must be them...

Sam – They're not making much noise.

Fred – It must be the GIGN, the French police tactical unit.

Sam – Oh no, it's Max...

Fred – I'd almost rather it had been the GIGN...

Scene 23

The press agent enters, holding a newspaper.

Max – Hey there, folks. So, what's going on?

Sam – You're here to bid us farewell before the police take us away?

Fred – Or perhaps you've come to cash your check...

Sam – With today's box office, we won't have much to pay you, I can guarantee that.

Fred – In prison, please bring us oranges; it'd be a refreshing change from watermelons.

Max – Have any of you read the newspaper?

Sam – No, why? Did we shift from the culture section to the crime page?

Max – Daniel Puddington has published a correction to his review of your show.

Fred – Just to bury us even deeper, I presume...

Max *(reading)* – "I stand by my verdict: this show isn't bad, it's very bad. Yet there are failures bordering on surrealism, so monumentally inept that they almost deserve to be called masterpieces of their kind."

Sam – A masterpiece? That's good, right?

Max *(reading)* – "This dreadful show reminds us of those terrible low-budget fantasy films that have since become cult classics. We watch them secretly with guilty pleasure, not for the quality of the script or the direction, but for the refreshing spirit of freedom behind such spectacular disasters."

Fred – At least there's a cinematic reference...

Max *(reading)* – "Why should theatre be reserved for people with talent, anyway? Like so many others, the two actors who wrote and perform this distressing show have invested their hopes and their savings in one dream: appearing at the Avignon Festival. And they've shown they're ready to do anything — absolutely anything — to achieve it. So let's give them a chance to improve. With a little imagination, I'm sure they can be even worse..."

Sam – I'm not quite sure how to interpret that...

Fred – It does end on a positive note, doesn't it?

Sam checks his phone again.

Sam – In any case, reservations are on the rise again. It's amazing! We're almost sold out for tomorrow...

Max – I told you! An article by Daniel Puddington in *Provence Matin* can launch a career...

Fred – And he didn't file a complaint?

Max – Believe me, I had to make quite a personal sacrifice to persuade him not to press charges... But I think the experience taught him something...

Sam – So, are we going to finish the festival?

Max – More good news: the programming director of the Camembert village hall is interested...

Fred – Is he actually purchasing the show?

Sam – How much is he offering?

Max – He's not buying the show. But he'll feed you and put you up.

Fred – Room...?

Max – In a barn next to the village hall.

Sam – Well, Molière began his journey that way...

Fred – It's a start, right?

Max – So? Double or nothing?

Sam – We're still considering it...

Fred – In any case, we already have an idea for next year's OFF Festival.

Max – Oh really?

Sam – You actually gave us the idea. You know, the struggles of a small company tackling Avignon for the first time with a dreadful show.

Max – Oh, yes...

Fred – We'll call it "Is There a Critic in the Audience?"

Sam displays the poster for the show. Dany enters.

Dany – Ladies and gentlemen, you've come to see a comedy I strongly advised you to avoid, so you've only yourselves to blame... If you enjoyed it, please tell people about it. If you didn't, think twice before posting a bad review on a ticket-booking website. You've seen what these people are capable of...

Ominous thriller music plays as Fred and Sam display the equipment they bought at Fixorama: some rope, a saw, a can of acid...

Blackout.

The End.

About the author

Born in 1955 in Auvers-sur-Oise (France), Jean-Pierre Martinez first took to the stage as a drummer in several rock bands before becoming a semiologist in advertising. He then worked as a television screenwriter before returning to the stage as a playwright. He has written around a hundred scripts for television and 123 plays, some of which have become classics (*Friday the 13th, Strip Poker*). His plays have been performed in more than 100 countries and translated into around 50 languages.

Amateur and professional theatre groups looking for plays to perform can download Jean-Pierre Martinez's plays for free from his websites :

https://jeanpierremartinez.net/

https://comediatheque.net/

However, performance rights, which constitute fair compensation for the author's work, are a legal obligation. Whether you are an amateur or a professional, you must request authorization to perform the play and pay the corresponding royalties for the production.

Jean-Pierre Martinez is represented by the Society of Dramatic Authors and Composers (SACD).

To get in touch with Jean-Pierre Martinez and request authorization to perform one of his works, please use the contact form on his websites.

Jean-Pierre Martinez recently returned to music, writing original songs inspired by his poems and plays.

With **Jean-Pierre Martinez Music**, he extends that creative universe through original songs: short stories in musical form, humorous or melancholy, in which each song sometimes becomes a miniature theatrical scene.

https://jeanpierremartinezmusic.com/

Other plays by the same author translated in English:

Monologues

Happy Dogs
Like a fish in the air
Short Stories

Comedies for 2

A Thwarted Vocation
EuroStar
Heads and Tails
Him and Her
Is there a pilot in the audience?
Last chance encounter
New Year's Eve at the Morgue
Not even dead
Pentimento
Preliminaries
Running on empty
Russian Roulette at the Kremlin
The Costa Mucho Castaways
The Dressing Gown
The Joker
The Rope
The Window across the courtyard

Comedies for 3

A brief moment of eternity
A simple business dinner
An innocent little murder
Cards on the Table
Cheaters
Crash Zone
Fragile, Handle with care
Friday the 13th
Horizons
Ménage à trois
One small step for a woman, one giant leap backward for Mankind
The Ways of Chance

Comedies for 4

A Cuckoo's nest
A hell of a night
A Skeleton in the Closet
Back to stage
Bed and Breakfast
Casket for two
Crisis and Punishment
Déjà vu
Family Portrait
Family Tree
Four stars
Friday the 13th
Gay friendly
Hangover
Happy Hour
How to get rid of your best friends
Is there a critic in the audience?
Is there an author in the audience?
Just a moment before the end of the world
Lovestruck at Swindlemore Hall
One marriage out of two
Perfect In-laws
Quarantine
Requiem for a Stradivarius
Strip Poker
Surviving Mankind
The Deal
The Fishbowl
The Perfect Son-in-Law
The Pyramids
The Smell of Money
The Tourists
The Worst Best Man Ever

Comedies for 5 to 6

All's well that starts badly
Christmas Eve at the Police Station
Crisis and Punishment
Critical but Stable
Dead End Boulevard
In lieu of flowers...
King of Fools
The Castaways of New Year's Eve
The President's Draw
The Rebels
Traffic Jam on Graveyard Lane

Comedies for 7 or more

At the bar counter
Backstage Comedy
Blue Flamingos
Check to the Kings
Christmas Eve at the Police Station
False exit
In flagrante delirium
Just like a Christmas movie
Miracle at Saint Mary Juana Abbey
Music does not always soothe the savage beasts
Neighbours' Day
Nicotine
Of Vegetables and Books
Offside
Open Hearts
Reality Show
Save our Savings
Special Dedication
Stories and Prehistories
Such a lovely village
The House of Our Dreams
The Jackpot
The Performance is not cancelled
The Most Beautiful Village in France
The Worst Village in England
Welcome aboard!
White Coats, Dark Humour

Collection of sketches

Apocalypse
Backstage Bits
Blackouts
Don't panic!
Dramedies
Enough is Enough
Ethan and Eve
Every Colour under the Sun
For real and for fun
Funny Stories
Him and Her
Killer Sketches
Lockdown Shorts
Lost time Chronicles
Memoirs of a Suitcase
No Sense Off Limits
Now and then
Of Animals and Men
Open Hearts
Open Letters
Park Bench Shorts
Sidewalk Chronicles
Stage Briefs
Stories to die for

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