

La Comédiathèque

The Rope

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Martinez



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The Rope

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In a country under the grip of a tyrant, as dissent simmers and repression rages, a doctor and a priest clash over whether the sacred duty of their respective roles outweighs that of the citizens they both are. The stakes are nothing short of the life or death of the dictator and consequently the survival of the regime or hastening its downfall...

Characters

The Doctor

The Priest

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The Surgery of a Military Doctor, within the Presidential Palace. Nothing allows to locate either the place or the time, but, towering above the desk, the majestic portrait of a general in uniform adorned with decorations indicates that the action takes place in a country under the grip of a tyrant. The doctor, dressed in a white coat, is seated behind his desk. He could be of any age, but his age will obviously contribute to the characterization of his character. He takes out a medical image from a folder, stands up, and proceeds to examine it in the light of an imaginary window located on the audience side. Suddenly, the phone rings. He returns to his desk, carefully stows the image back into the folder, and then picks up the receiver.

Doctor – Yes, sergeant...? Yes... Very well, let him in...

A priest in a black cassock enters. He can be young or old, but his age, and the age difference with the doctor, will influence his character and the relationship between them.

Priest – Captain...

The doctor stands up to greet him.

Doctor – Good morning, Father... Or should I say lieutenant? Because you are military, too.

Priest – The time of soldier-monks is over. I am first and foremost the chaplain of the Palace. As you are primarily a doctor, I imagine. We are not meant to be assigned to combat units, are we? Our mission is to support our comrades and assist them when needed.

Doctor – We would both make poor fighters, I'm afraid.

Priest – I can call you Doctor if you prefer.

Doctor – Call me whatever you like, Father... As long as you don't call me son...

Priest – I'll try to remember that.

Doctor – Anyway, thank you for coming so quickly. Actually, you are the first. But please, have a seat... Can I offer you some coffee? A pastry...

Priest – No, thank you. (*He sits down*) So... it's for a vaccine, I believe.

Doctor – You're not afraid of needles, I hope...

Priest – No... However, I confess I have misplaced my vaccination card.

Doctor – Don't worry, none of my patients has ever managed to produce their vaccination card. Frankly, I'm not even sure where mine is...

Priest – In that case, Doctor, I am entirely at your service.

Doctor – Everyone at the Palace will have to go through it, you see... With the current proliferation of viruses... The General may be in good health, but he's no spring chicken. Even though he rarely ventures beyond the Palace walls these days, we must shield him from any potential external contaminants as much as possible. That's why we need to inoculate those in his immediate vicinity. And anyone who might come into contact with him.

Priest – Quite right. It was once referred to as the sanitary cordon, if I'm not mistaken...

Doctor – Let's hope this method is more effective in medicine than in politics...

Priest – Every day, I offer my prayers for the General's well-being, but I understand the importance of embracing the aid of science.

Doctor – Yes... We share the work, in a way. I tend to the General's physical health as his personal physician, while you safeguard the welfare of his soul as his confessor.

Priest – And I don't know who has the more difficult task...

The doctor seems surprised by this discreetly subversive remark, which encourages him to confide.

Doctor – Indeed, these are challenging times. While I may not be directly exposed to the trials my fellow physicians endure, I'm aware that in recent days there's been a steady stream of wounded coming into the hospital.

Priest – The recent riots have brought forth numerous casualties. When medical options are exhausted for these unfortunate souls, I frequently offer them solace before they depart for the next world..

Doctor – The riots... or rather brutal quelling of it.

Priest – Disorder cannot be allowed to prevail, can it...? Let's hope a peaceful solution can be found soon.

Doctor – That's what the Church deals in. The streets tend to voice demands.

Priest – Between hope and demand, there lies a space for negotiation. Don't you believe in the possibility of a democratic transition?

Doctor – A democratic transition...? While the leader of the opposition has just been arrested and thrown into prison without even a semblance of a trial?

Priest – I didn't imply my endorsement of such methods...

Doctor – Repression is escalating by the day... My greatest fear is civil war. And when a war breaks out, there is no room for compromise anymore. Peace can only be made between a loser doomed to surrender and the winner who dictates the terms.

Priest – War would yield only losers... Do you have faith, Doctor?

Doctor – I attend church with my family on Sundays... Mostly for the ambiance... I believe in certain things... Certain values...

Priest – It's a beginning...

Doctor – I wish I could place more faith in your God, Father. But in times like these, there are plenty of reasons to doubt...

Priest – They say practice makes perfect. And sometimes, it's through prayer that one discovers Faith... That's why rituals hold significance in all religions.

Doctor – Until now, I've mostly attended church to feel a sense of belonging to a community. Yet in our nation, those who attend mass have become a faction, and I'm uncertain if I still wish to be associated.

Priest – Throughout history, the Church has regrettably been manipulated by those in power.

Doctor – Some view it merely as a tool of power.

Priest – That's why it's crucial to have faith in God above all, even when one is cautious of the Church.

Doctor – Before believing in God, it seems one must first believe in humanity. Do you have faith in humanity, Father?

Priest – I believe in the potential for redemption before Our Lord. As for the rest, I entrust it to the laws made by humans

Doctor – I understand... Render unto Caesar what is Caesar's... and absolve oneself of responsibility. Even when Caesar has turned tyrant?

The priest seems uncomfortable.

Priest – My duty is to listen, Captain. I have no desire to become an informant. However, I caution you to exercise prudence. We are within the confines of the Palace, not a confessional, and here, the walls do indeed have ears...

Doctor – Father, let's be real. You're not living in some isolated monastery, disconnected from the world. Being passive implies agreement, and you know it. You too, have a responsibility...

Priest – Of course... None of us can shirk our responsibilities. I'm only human, like yourself. Priests, too, have their own sins to confess, you know...

Doctor – Hearing a priest's confession probably isn't as heavy as you think. Vanity... Gluttony... Temptation... But imagine having to hear that of a bloodthirsty dictator, every Sunday before mass... To have to absolve him of his crimes... It's probably not so easy...

Priest – You understand, I must maintain the confidentiality mandated by my role... But I sense there's a more personal matter troubling you...

Doctor – Indeed, I didn't just call you here for a vaccine.

Priest – I'm listening...

The doctor seems hesitant.

Doctor – I'm not sure if you're aware of this story. When Hitler was just a child, he fell into a river in the middle of winter. A comrade risked his life to save him. This courageous boy later became a priest...

Priest – I wasn't aware of that... So, what lesson do you take from it?

Doctor – Well, think about it. If that brave soul hadn't saved young Adolf, wouldn't history have unfolded differently?

Priest – Probably...

Doctor – It's said that from evil, sometimes good can arise. Conversely, a good deed can lead to a catastrophe.

Priest – Sometimes, no doubt.

Doctor – So, here's a philosophical quandary that could almost be an exam question: Does saving the life of a drowning tyrant truly constitute a good deed?

Priest – But in this story, we're talking about a child...

Doctor – Yes...

Priest – A child whose fate was not necessarily sealed.

Doctor – Exactly...

Priest – This child's future could've taken a completely different turn, had his life followed a different path. For instance, if he hadn't faced rejection from the Vienna Academy of Fine Arts twice, he might have pursued a career as a painter...

Doctor – That's a possibility.

Priest – But will you hold his examiners responsible for the Holocaust too?

Doctor – I'm not certain...

Priest – Ultimately, a person's destiny is shaped by a cascade of successive opportunities.

Doctor – But what if these opportunities weren't truly random chances? What if we're just the unfortunate outcomes of the myriad causes that define us? What if everything was already written?

Priest – If that were the case, then it was already written that Hitler would survive drowning. And that he would face rejection from the Fine Arts Academy. And no one would be responsible for what Hitler did afterwards. Except himself, of course.

Doctor – So, for you, would determinism still be subject to free will?

Priest – What's certain is that nobody can foretell the future with absolute certainty. As a doctor, you save lives, even the lives of children, without knowing what they will become.

Doctor – Yes, but what if I did...? It's purely hypothetical. What if I were the one to witness young Adolf drowning, knowing what he would become... A monster.

Priest – It's an absurd hypothesis, as I've mentioned... But then what? Would you have let that child drown...?

Doctor – That's the question I'm asking myself... (*The doctor turns to the audience*) That I'm asking you...

The priest freezes, as if time halts, and a shift in lighting signifies that this direct address to the audience, breaking the fourth wall, serves as a brief interlude in the flow of the play.

Doctor – Picture this... You're walking by a river and you see a child drowning. You know that child is Adolf Hitler. Do you throw him a rope to pull him out or not? It's not even about risking your own life by diving in. On the flip side, you can perfectly pretend you didn't see him. You don't have to choose between heroism and failure to aid someone in peril, you simply have to make a choice. He's crying out for help. What do you do? Do you throw him a rope to rescue him or let him perish? Not easy to answer that question, is it?

A pause.

Doctor – Who throws him a rope? Raise your hand... (*Time for the audience to raise their hand or not*) Who averts their gaze and walks away? Raise your hand (*Time for the audience to raise their hand or not*) Alright... Now, let's consider this: What if it wasn't young Hitler, but a man or a woman in politics who could potentially become a tyrant if elected. I don't know... You know who... Do you still extend a helping hand or not? Not easy, is it? Is there a universally moral answer to this dilemma, or should each situation be evaluated individually? And if so, where do you draw the line? What criteria do you use to determine who to save and who to let perish?

We return to the light and the previous situation, as if this aside had never occurred. And we continue the action where we left off.

Priest – It seems to me your inquiries are more than just theoretical.

Doctor – I do seek counsel, indeed. But as you mentioned, this isn't a confessional...

Priest – If you wish, I can hear your confession.

Doctor – And you wouldn't disclose anything I share with you?

Priest – That's the essence of the confessional's confidentiality, much like medical privacy.

Doctor – Pardon me, but... given the circumstances, I can't picture myself waiting in line for confession.

Priest – A priest can receive confession anywhere.

Doctor – Here? And now?

Priest – As the chaplain of this Palace, I'm at your service.

Doctor – Very well, then I wish to confess, Father...

The priest shifts from casual demeanour to that of confession, making the sign of the cross.

Priest – Let us pray together that God grants us the grace to recognize our sins.

Doctor – Amen...

Priest – I'm listening, my son.

Doctor – Father, I have a moral dilemma to discuss with you.

Priest – I'll do my best to offer guidance, following the principles of Our Lord.

Doctor – A few weeks ago, I conducted a routine examination on the General. During the examination, I discovered a cardiac anomaly... Subsequent tests confirmed it.

Priest – An anomaly...?

Doctor – Specifically, an abdominal aortic aneurysm... Yes, even dictators have a heart, you know...

Priest – That's regrettable, indeed... Is it serious?

Doctor – Yes.

Priest – But can it be treated?

Doctor – With surgery and proper medical care, yes, if caught early enough.

Priest – Then why is it a dilemma for you?

Doctor – If I report this anomaly to one of my colleagues, the General will receive treatment and likely survive for years...

Priest – And...?

Doctor – If I remain silent, he'll likely pass away in the coming weeks. Perhaps even tomorrow. And the dictatorship will probably not outlive him...

The priest remains momentarily speechless.

Priest – You're not seriously considering this...?

Doctor – It's an extraordinary chance to alter the course of history, isn't it? To dismantle this regime while saving the lives of countless opponents who face execution in prison courtyards every day. Or those who meet their end at the hands of police bullets during protests in the streets. You mentioned the potential for a democratic transition earlier...

Priest – By condemning one of your patients, who has entrusted his life to you, to death?

Doctor – To save many others, yes. Why not view it as an act of resistance?

Priest – Because before being an engaged citizen, you are a doctor! You are bound by the Hippocratic Oath!

Doctor (*quoting the Hippocratic oath*) – "I will never intentionally cause harm."
Primum non nocere...

Priest – First, do no harm...

Doctor – That's precisely why I mentioned of a moral dilemma... Today, I must arbitrate between two conflicting injunctions. The doctor orders me to focus solely on the patient and to provide treatment. The citizen tells me to consider the crimes of this man and let him die to prevent him from committing further ones.

Priest – You're forgetting the military, who must obey orders.

Doctor – Obey orders... By that logic, at the Nuremberg Trials, there would have been only acquittals. They all claimed they simply obeyed their leader...

Priest – You sought my counsel, didn't you?

Doctor – I didn't commit to follow it... But I'm listening...

Priest – Let the doctor fulfil his duty, honouring his oath. It falls upon the military not to obey orders they find unjust. And for the citizen to rise up, even resorting to acts of resistance if needed.

Doctor – But today, both the military and the citizen are powerless against an oppressively efficient regime. Only the doctor holds the potential to dismantle the dictatorship, by hastening the dictator's death.

Priest – As a doctor, are you assuming the authority of life and death over your patients? Are you playing God?

Doctor – If your God permits a tyrant to hold onto power, then it falls upon men to take action and bring him down from his pedestal.

Priest – But as a doctor, you're entrusted with a sacred duty, much like myself. Every individual has the right to healing, regardless of their past deeds, just as every guilty person has the right to defence, regardless of their crimes.

Doctor (*ironically*) – And every sinner deserves forgiveness, regardless of the magnitude of their sins, correct?

Priest – If they truly repent, then yes.

Doctor – Has the General sought repentance through confession with you for his crimes?

Priest – That falls under the confidentiality mandated by the confessional.

Doctor – Even if he repents, it won't halt his relentless execution of opponents. As a moral guide, it seems you have little sway over him.

Priest – Much like you, tyrants are convinced they're working for the good of the people. They claim to act according to their Faith, and often pose as defenders of religion...

Doctor – You don't seem convinced.

Priest – It's not for me to judge... I believe in the power of repentance and forgiveness. I've chosen to dedicate my life to serving God.

Doctor – And I'm here to serve humanity.

Priest – Indeed. Every individual, without exception. Whether doctors, priests, or lawyers, we're the ones whom even the most despicable can trust completely. That's our commitment. It's a challenging and often thankless duty, but it's indispensable. We stand as the final barrier against savagery. And we're the last refuge for those whom society has already condemned, but who still hold onto a glimmer of humanity.

Doctor – True, but while we deliberate, citizens are perishing under bullets or enduring torture.

Priest – So, you aim to rescue humanity through deceit and murder? Do you propose to dismantle tyranny by adopting the tactics of the tyrant? By forsaking the solemn oath you took among your peers?

Doctor – I told you. It's not an easy decision...

The priest freezes and the lighting changes for a new aside with the audience.

Doctor *(to the audience)* – If you were a doctor, what would you do in such a situation? *(He picks up the file on his desk and shows it to the audience)* Who would pass this file to a colleague to save the life of this general? Raise your hand! *(A pause for part of the audience to raise their hand or not)* Who would stash this file away and let this tyrant die? Raise your hand! *(Another pause for part of the audience to raise their hand or not)*. But you're not doctors, are you...?

The lighting returns to normal and the scene continues.

Priest – Do you support the death penalty, Doctor?

Doctor – No... Generally speaking, I do not.

Priest – One must take a clear stance on the death penalty. There can be no room for exceptions. Life is sacred. Even in secular societies, it's in the pursuit of this principle that the death penalty has been abolished... To refrain from irrevocably stripping even the most heinous criminals of their humanity... and to acknowledge, however faintly, the potential for redemption.

Doctor – I support abortion and, in certain cases, euthanasia. As a doctor, I may find myself in the position of having to administer death, potentially contradicting the Hippocratic Oath. But let me pose the question back to you. Do you advocate for the preservation of life under all circumstances?

Priest – As a priest, yes.

Doctor – So, you're against abortion, even in cases of rape or when a pregnancy poses a threat to the mother's life? Are you also against ending the unbearable suffering of a person for whom medicine offers no relief?

Priest – As a human being, I'm not indifferent to human suffering...

Doctor – So, you also sometimes place the man before the priest, to answer the difficult questions posed by reality. Rather than sheltering behind lofty moral principles that sometimes lead to inhumane decisions.

Priest – As a priest, I have no power to take a life... But if a doctor were to confess to me having done so under very specific circumstances, and genuinely repented, I would grant absolution.

Doctor – In that case, I'll confess to you after the General's death. To ease both my conscience and yours.

Priest – So, your mind is made up...

Doctor – Especially since you've agreed to absolve me.

Priest – You are considering knowingly letting a man die. I cannot absolve you in advance.

Doctor – But, considering the General's age... It would merely hasten his death by a few months. Perhaps just a few days... It can hardly be labeled as murder... Let's call it avoiding unnecessary medical intervention.

Priest – You're playing with words. But I cannot let you commit such an abomination.

Doctor – Would you go as far as to denounce me?

Priest – It's my duty.

Doctor – Don't forget, you're bound by the confidentiality of confession!

Priest – True, but there are exceptions to this duty of secrecy... Especially when a person's life is in jeopardy.

Doctor – I trusted you... And now you're suggesting that the confidentiality of confession isn't absolute... Yet in the past, the Church remained silent on far more atrocious crimes...

Priest – If someone confides in me their intention to harm another or carry out an attack, I'm compelled to notify the authorities. It's an unequivocal duty, even under human law. Failing to act would be tantamount to abandoning a person in peril... A lawyer, upon discovering their client's plans for murder, must inform the police. The same obligation applies to a doctor, and you're fully aware of it.

Doctor – But I'm not going to kill anyone. I'm just letting nature take its course... Letting God do His work, so to speak.

Priest – You invoke God when it suits you. Even though you don't believe in Him.

Doctor – So, are you prepared to forsake your oath as well?

Priest – I told you, it's about saving a life. In this case, I'm not bound by any oath.

Doctor – Even if by denouncing me to the police of this totalitarian regime, you condemn me to certain death?

Priest – Simply fulfil your duty as a doctor to avoid facing such condemnation...

Doctor – I'll fulfil my duty as a citizen.

Priest – Then you leave me no choice...

Doctor – Are you sure it's the priest, and not the officer, who will denounce me?

Priest – I am a priest before I am an officer. But I am a man before I am a priest. And as a man, I cannot stand by and allow you to take the life of another human being.

The phone rings. The doctor answers.

Doctor – Yes, Sergeant? I'm listening... Alright... I'll go as soon as possible... (*He hangs up*) The opposition leader has just been found hanged in his cell...

The priest is struck by the news.

Priest – That's terrible...

Doctor – I'm being summoned to confirm the death and officially certify it as a suicide. You see, Father, the General doesn't bother with discretion when eliminating his opponents. He does so openly. And it falls upon me, as a forensic doctor, to cover up these murders as suicides.

Priest – It's despicable... Are you going to participate in this farce?

Doctor – Earlier, you wanted me to simply obey orders!

Priest – I agree with you on that point. When orders are illegitimate, it's a duty to disobey.

Doctor – I've already explained how I could stop this cycle of violence without causing harm...

The action freezes and the lighting changes for a new aside.

Priest (*to the audience*) – Unable to rely on God, I need your help... You're a priest. What would you do in my place? Who among you would report this doctor, after hearing his confession, to preserve the life of a man who also happens to be a ruthless tyrant? Raise your hand. (*A pause for some spectators to raise their hands*) Who says nothing and lets this doctor commit murder by neglecting to treat his patient? Raise your hand. (*A pause for some spectators to raise their hands*) But you're not priests, are you?

The lighting returns to normal and the action resumes.

Priest – I admit I'm utterly perplexed in the face of so much violence...

Doctor – If you speak up, you'll have my death on your conscience... You've witnessed how the General treats his opponents. They'll find me hanging in my cell as well... Do you truly intend to report me?

Priest – Not if you stop me...

Doctor – Stop you? How?

Priest – By killing me too...

Doctor – Is that what you want?

Priest – I leave you free to choose.

Doctor – To avoid having to choose yourself... Who do you think you are, Father, offering yourself as a sacrifice? For Jesus Christ? But your sacrifice would make no sense... and wouldn't benefit anyone!

Priest – Jesus sacrificed Himself to offer humanity the chance for reconciliation. That's the essence of "religion". Bringing believers together. And it's also what the Eucharist symbolizes. The unity among all people...

There's a brief moment of hesitation. The doctor appears to be running low on arguments.

Doctor – In that case... The decision is made, Father... And it's time for the injection...

Priest – I am prepared.

The doctor prepares the injection, under the priest's gaze.

Doctor – Don't worry, it won't be painful. You'll hardly feel a thing...

Priest – I place my trust entirely in you... just like all your other patients.

The doctor administers the injection.

Doctor – Still not thirsty?

Priest – I'll take a glass of water.

Doctor – I'll get it for you...

The doctor exits. The priest notices the file on the desk. He takes it, but doesn't open it. The doctor returns with a glass of water.

Doctor – Ah... Be cautious, Father, doctor-patient confidentiality...

Priest – Anyway, I wouldn't be able to interpret these images...

The doctor hands him the glass of water and the priest takes it.

Doctor – Here's your glass of water.

Priest – The condemned man's glass...?

Doctor – Are you really willing to sacrifice yourself to avoid your responsibilities?

Priest – To avoid my responsibilities, no. To avoid betraying my convictions, perhaps.

Doctor – Isn't that a way to escape reality to avoid confronting it? I wonder if you wouldn't have been better off as a monk, after all.

Priest – It would have been easier, no doubt.

Doctor – And all this to save a man who has committed crimes against humanity.

Priest – God will be his judge. Or the justice of men.

Doctor – For now, he is the law... And he asserts to be enforcing it in the name of God.

Priest – I don't subscribe to this modern Inquisition, trust me.

Doctor – But you haven't taken a stand against it... Once the regime collapses, you may be summoned to testify, you realize? Despite the confidentiality of confession... You might face accusations of collaboration.

Priest – Yes... You as well, actually... You're the General's personal physician. And thus far, you haven't exactly been a vocal opponent... Are you attempting to secure a peaceful future by abandoning ship just before it sinks... after allowing the captain to perish?

Doctor – Unfortunately, I couldn't even pass for a last-minute resistor. I may have hastened the tyrant's end, but by doing so I would have betrayed my doctor's oath. I can't boast of that feat.

Priest – You could assassinate him in broad daylight. With a gunshot. As an officer, you possess a weapon, and you frequently meet with the General.

Doctor – I'll never be a hero, I'm afraid. I'll never be Brutus stabbing Caesar in front of the entire Senate. I won't have that courage. Unlike you, I don't have a taste for sacrifice. I'm just a coward, indeed.

Priest – That's why this clandestine murder suits you well, doesn't it...?

Doctor – Crime without punishment... But no glory in death either.

Priest – It remains to be seen whether there will be no punishment. You won't face execution under the dictatorship for killing the General, but you might be condemned by the liberators for collaboration. Just like me...

Doctor – Indeed, there seems to be no clear solution for me either. And you're correct. Perhaps I deserve it, after all. Initially, I supported the coup d'état. To escape the chaos. I believed in the restoration of order. Yet, when order is enforced by the powerful upon the weak, it swiftly becomes a new form of disorder.

Priest – Unfortunately, both order and disorder abide by the law of the strongest.

Doctor – So what should we do?

Priest – Man's fate is to walk without a map in a pathless desert, in search of an oasis that doesn't exist. That's why it's better to have Faith as a traveling companion...

The doctor takes out the medical image from the file.

Doctor – Or the enlightenment of science... Are you familiar with semiotics, Father?

Priest – It's the study of signs. Just because we have Faith doesn't mean we're not interested in science, Doctor. Conversely, there are believers among the greatest scientists too.

Doctor – In medicine, semiotics delves into symptoms for diagnosis and treatment. Ultimately, doctors are akin to ancient augurs, who claimed to foresee the future in animal entrails.

Priest – It was the haruspices who read in the entrails of sacrificed animals in ancient Rome. The augurs interpreted the flight of birds...

Doctor – Nevertheless, these diviners were also your predecessors, weren't they?

Priest – Indeed. You and I once shared the same role. It's only recently that the paths of science and religion have diverged. Sometimes for the better, and sometimes for the worse...

The doctor takes out the medical image and looks at it.

Doctor – Interpreting the signs... After all, medicine is still not an exact science... I might have simply made a mistake... To others, it would merely be a medical error...

Priest – But you, you would know that you deliberately let one of your patients die.

Doctor – I'll remember all those I've managed to save..

Priest – Like the augurs you mentioned, do you believe you can foresee the future and single-handedly shape history?

Doctor – I can always try...

Priest – How can you be sure that the downfall of the dictator won't lead to a bloodbath? A civil war? Mass purges? This dictatorship may spawn another, even bloodier one. History has shown us that the Terror can succeed the Revolution.

Doctor – So what? Do nothing? Not resist? Even when you're a coward and have the means to act without taking any risks?

Priest – I don't know...

Doctor – Do you never have a guilty conscience yourself?

Priest – Indeed... But I believe in keeping one's commitments. In the oath we both made. Each in our own way, we made vows. We must keep our word, whatever happens. Otherwise, everything falls apart. The law itself, in its application, is sometimes unjust. But if there's no law anymore, there's no civilization. And without faith in the word given, there's no Humanity...

Doctor – Words can also be wielded as weapons. The dictator is the one who dictates. Who dictates his own law. The law of the strongest.

Priest – And what about someone who pronounces a death sentence, disregarding the law? Doesn't he also risk becoming a potential dictator?

Doctor – Laws are meant to be interpreted. There are moments in life when a person's death might be the least worst outcome.

Priest – Perhaps today. But when you put your hand in this gear, are you sure it won't end up crushing you entirely? Shouldn't we, at some point, individually decide to break this cycle of violence?

Doctor – So you too, like that future priest, would have saved Hitler from drowning.

Priest – I would have saved a child. I wouldn't have condemned him in advance. Otherwise, we should preventively lock up all extremists because they might become terrorists. And lock up all believers for fear they might become extremists. At this rate, those who govern us would quickly throw into prison all those who don't think exactly like them...

Doctor – But it's already the case with this dictatorship that looks like a theocracy!

Priest – Indeed. That's why those who seek to overthrow it must absolutely avoid reproducing this deadly pattern.

Doctor – You mentioned earlier, if we know someone is about to commit an attack, shouldn't we stop him?

Priest – But we can never know...

Doctor – We can never be certain, I agree... but sometimes we must defend ourselves before being attacked. It's not certain that you'll ever be infected by a virus, yet you agree to be vaccinated.

Priest – You can't equate the worst among us to malevolent viruses to be eradicated preemptively, stripping them of their humanity. Evil first resides within each of us. It's our duty to combat it within ourselves before confronting it in others

Doctor – I confront my own darkness. But that won't stop the hand of the murderer ready to strike.

Priest – Today, there are models to predict who will become a criminal. We're told they're almost one hundred percent reliable. Should we preemptively lock up these individuals?

Doctor – We already lock up dangerous madmen.

Priest – Because they've lost their free will...

Doctor – And we can also provoke abortions because a test indicates the child would have a genetic disorder.

Priest – Which brings up the issue of eugenics... Should we eliminate carriers of genetic diseases at birth? So they won't burden themselves and society?

Doctor – When it comes to eugenics, we're not discussing criminals.

Priest – Some claim to have identified a 'crime chromosome'... Modern science oddly echoes the phrenology of the 19th century, which purported to identify congenital defects based on skull shape... We're not far from the pseudo-scientific fantasies of Nazi scientists, which led to mass exterminations, all in pursuit of creating a 'superior' race. Isn't a civilization's level better measured by how it treats its weakest?

Doctor – Currently, our concern primarily lies with what fate awaits the leader of this regime. Do you truly believe the General can still repent? And even if he did, how genuine would that repentance be when the crowd is already clamouring at the gates of the Presidential Palace?

Priest – It will be left to the human courts to judge him, to ponder his responsibility. What is our share of freedom in the face of determinism? That's the question... If our destiny is already sealed from our birth, then we cease to be human and become mere pre-programmed machines. I can't accept to live in such a world... If you believe that some are programmed to evil, while others to good, there's no longer freedom, no more responsibility, and no chance for redemption. It would suffice then to sort the wheat from the chaff, scientifically, until all the weeds are definitively eradicated. Wouldn't that be a totalitarian society?

Doctor – I believe in freedom. But it's not absolute... We have varying degrees of freedom in how we respond, but the circumstances themselves are often imposed upon us. Consider a large family, each child faces the same environment but responds differently, depending on who they are and their choices.

Priest – Yes... When someone has suffered violence, they may either become violent themselves or not. That's within our power, indeed. But I choose to believe in what is now called resilience.

Doctor – Indeed. We shape ourselves in response to the circumstances we face and according to who we are. But do we really have a choice in what we are?

Priest – Do you believe the General was fated to become a dictator? That he had no alternative? And do you draw the conclusion that he should have been eliminated at birth? Like young Hitler, should he have been drowned?

Doctor – I don't know... I feel like this philosophical debate is somewhat futile... While outside our windows, people are fighting to alter the course of history.

At this moment, sounds of street rumbling and bursts of automatic weapons can be heard.

Priest – Unfortunately, for now, as both a doctor and as a priest, all we can do is wait powerless to see the outcome of this confrontation. Besides... what led you to become a doctor?

Doctor – My father was a surgeon. One of my brothers is a radiologist and the other a dentist. I have a heavy heredity. And you? I imagine your father wasn't a monk.

Priest – My father was a butcher... He wasn't religious, and he didn't support my decision to become a priest.

Doctor – He must have been disappointed that there wasn't anyone to carry on the family butcher business...

Priest – A son who becomes a priest... I believe he would have preferred if I had come out as gay, honestly...

Doctor – Are you an only child?

Priest – I have four sisters. None of them chose the convent life, I assure you...

Doctor – Four sisters... and you chose to wear the robe.

Priest – Do you have children, Captain?

Doctor – I have a son.

Priest – If your son were a criminal and came to you, wounded, seeking treatment, would you let him die?

Doctor – Probably not.

Priest – By becoming a priest, I made the decision, like Our Lord, to regard all men as my own children. You'll understand that I cannot bear to let even one of them perish, even the worst among them.

Doctor – My son is braver than me. He's out on the barricades right now. He could be killed at any moment. It's also to save him that I want to see an end to this regime, and thus to this tyrant.

Priest – But nothing is written yet. The worst is never certain.

Doctor – I fear it's more than probable, alas.

A moment passes. New tumult outside.

Priest – In a sense, I pity you... It must be very sad to live in a world where everyone's fate is predetermined.

Doctor – Even for criminals, determinism is a good excuse to shirk their responsibilities. Have you heard this other tale? A man encounters a snake trapped beneath a rock. The snake pleads for release, promising not to harm him. The man frees the snake, only to be bitten. As he lies dying, the snake apologizes, explaining that it's its nature to kill.

Priest – Then it's also my nature not to let you commit this crime.

Doctor – Until you denounce me, condemning me to certain death?

Priest – If you leave me no choice.

Doctor – You won't do it.

Priest – Because instead of administering a vaccine, you injected me with poison, like that snake you mentioned?

Doctor – Do you truly believe that's what I did?

Priest – You could have allowed the General to perish without divulging it in confession... Your decision was already made, wasn't it? Why did you confess to me about this forthcoming crime?

Doctor – Perhaps, because I needed encouragement... I admitted to being a coward, didn't I? I needed your blessing...

Priest – If you really injected me with poison, know that I forgive you... And then you'll spare me a conscience problem too...

Doctor – Is that what you wanted, right?

Priest – I will pray for you for the time I have left to live...

Doctor – It will probably be the first time in history that a priest is murdered during confession, and he absolves his killer on the spot.

Priest – I still regret not being able to convince you...

A moment passes.

Doctor – To throw a rope or not to a drowning tyrant...? To hang him, perhaps...

The phone rings. The doctor answers.

Doctor – Yes, Sergeant... Yes... When? That's terrible, indeed... I understand... Okay... (*He hangs up*) The General has just succumbed to a heart attack...

Priest – Oh my God!...

Doctor – God has little to do with this, you know...

Priest – But now that your fault is consummated, I can absolve you...

Doctor – Really?

Priest – If you sincerely repent.

Doctor – I take no pride in it, in any case.

Priest – I will accept that... May God, the Father of mercy, who reconciled the world to Himself through the death and resurrection of His Son, grant you forgiveness and peace. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, I absolve you of your sins, which you have confessed, and I return you to the communion of the Church. May the Lord be with you.

Doctor – Will you also absolve me of having murdered you?

Priest – I have already forgiven you. But to absolve you, the crime would have to be truly committed, and I would have to be already dead. That seems difficult to me... You'll have to find another confessor.

Doctor – I see...

Priest – But you didn't actually poison me, did you?

Doctor – And you? Would you truly have denounced me?

Priest – Who knows...

Doctor – In any case, you won't die from a contagious disease... You're vaccinated for a few years...

The priest gets up to leave. The phone rings. The doctor answers.

Doctor – Yes, Sergeant... Thank you for letting me know... (*He hangs up*) The protesters are storming the palace, we will soon have to face the consequences of our choices...

Priest – God help us...

The doctor takes a pistol from a drawer and places it on his desk.

Doctor – Help yourself... and Heaven will help you.

Priest – Who do you intend to use this weapon against, Captain? Against your former companions or against your current allies, who likely don't see you as one of their own?

Doctor – We'll see, Father. For now, it's about saving our skins. Let's not stay here...

They rise to leave.

Blackout.

The End.

About the author

Born in 1955 in Auvers-sur-Oise (France), Jean-Pierre Martinez was first a drummer for several rock bands before becoming a semiologist in advertising. He then began a career writing television scripts before turning to theatre and writing plays. He has written close to a hundred scripts for television and as many plays, some of which have already become classics (*Friday the 13th*, *Strip Poker*). He is one of the most produced contemporary playwrights in France and in other francophone countries. Several of his plays are also available in Spanish and English, and are regularly produced in the United States and Latin America.

Amateur and professional theatre groups looking for plays to perform can download Jean-Pierre Martinez's plays for free from his website La Comédiathèque (<https://comediatheque.net/>). However, public productions are subject to SACD filing.

For those who prefer reading or working from books, printed versions of his plays can be purchased from Amazon for a price similar to that of photocopying this document.

Other plays by the same author translated in English:

Comedies for 2

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
Preliminaries
Running on empty
The Costa Mucho Castaways
The Joker
The Window across the courtyard

Comedies for 3

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

Comedies for 4

A Cuckoo's nest
A hell of a night
Back to stage
Bed and Breakfast
Casket for two
Crisis and Punishment
Family Portrait
Family Tree
Four stars
Friday the 13th
Gay friendly
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
Quarantine
Strip Poker
Surviving Mankind
The Deal
The perfect Son-in-Law
The Smell of Money

Comedies for 5 to 6

All's well that starts badly
Christmas Eve at the Police Station
Crisis and Punishment
Critical but Stable
In lieu of flowers...
King of Fools

Comedies for 7 or more

Backstage Comedy
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
Neighbours' Day
Open Hearts
Save our Savings
Special Dedication
Stories and Prehistories
The Jackpot
The Performance is not cancelled
The Worst Village in England
Welcome aboard!
White Coats, Dark Humour

Collection of sketches

Him and Her
Lost time Chronicles
Open Hearts
Sidewalk Chronicles
Stories to die for

Monologues

Like a fish in the air

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Avignon – April 2024
© La Comédiathèque – ISBN 978-2-38602-181-7
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