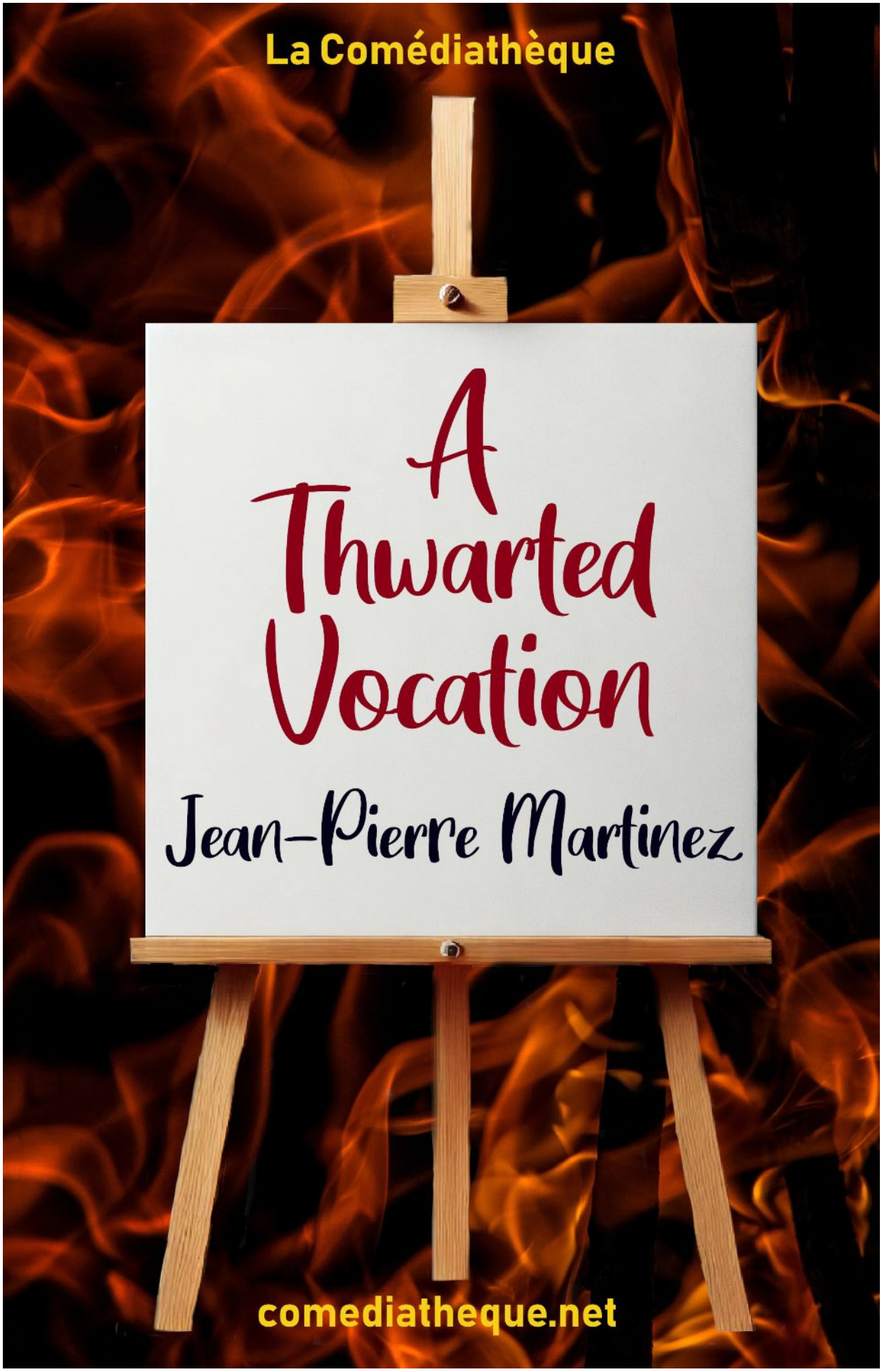
La Comédiathèque
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Jean-Pierre Martinez
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A Thwarted Vocation

Jean-Pierre Martinez

Translated by the author

Ariel, a young student, has an appointment with the Director of the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna, who is to decide whether she will be admitted. More than a century earlier, the director at the time, Christian Griepenkerl, rejected the application of a certain Adolf Hitler. That thwarted vocation would indirectly lead to the disastrous consequences we know. Can an apparently insignificant decision change the course of history by altering one person's destiny? We may never know… unless we could go back and see what follows from a different choice. With humour, this tragicomedy explores questions that have haunted humanity for centuries.

Characters:
Ariel
Director

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Scene 1

The director's office at the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna, Austria. A Viennese waltz plays softly in the background. Ariel Tannenbaum enters. She is a young woman dressed in a rather masculine style, wearing a beanie that conceals her red hair. She carries a portfolio under her arm. Clearly impressed, she takes in her surroundings. The room is furnished in an old-fashioned style, but a computer sits prominently on the desk. Against the back wall hangs a painting by Egon Schiele. On one side of the stage, there is a mirror positioned so that it does not reflect the auditorium. Ariel admires the Schiele painting. The music gradually fades. Her mobile phone rings. She answers.

Ariel *(annoyed)* – Yes, Mum… No, I haven't forgotten my interview. As if I could forget! I haven't slept all night… And you've already called me twenty times to remind me… Yes, of course I'll be there for Shabbat, as always… Listen, I can't talk now. I'm in the director's office, and he'll be here any moment… Yes, I know Hitler failed the entrance exam to the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna twice. You've told me that twenty times too… I promise I'll do my best to get in on my first attempt… And if I don't, I promise I won't invade Poland. Now I really must go… Yes, I'll call you when I come out… Love you too…

She puts her phone away. The music resumes. She begins pacing back and forth. She glances at herself in the mirror and adjusts her appearance. Then, she sits down. She waits for a moment, she checks her watch, then eventually takes a blank sheet of paper from her portfolio. Looking into the mirror, she starts drawing a self-portrait. Once finished, she places the drawing back in her portfolio. After a while, she dozes off in her chair. The music stops.

Blackout.

Scene 2

Lights up.

The setting remains unchanged, but the computer has disappeared, and the Egon Schiele painting has been replaced by a portrait of Emperor Franz Joseph. Ariel wakes up. She notices that the painting has changed. She is clearly surprised, but she has little time to gather her thoughts, as Christian Griepenkerl enters. He is a man in his sixties, dressed with the elegance typical of the early 20th century. He wears a three-piece suit and a coat. A bowler hat rests atop his head, and he carries a walking cane.

Director – My apologies for keeping you waiting. My carriage lost a wheel, and I had to finish the journey on foot.

Ariel stands up from her chair.

Ariel – Good morning, sir…

Director – The streets of Vienna are becoming more dangerous by the day, especially with all these new automobiles. Horse-drawn carriages were already having enough trouble sharing the roads with electric trams… I'll never understand why people feel compelled to change everything all the time… Don't you agree?

Ariel – I don't know…

The Director, busy removing his coat and hat and hanging them on a coat stand, barely glances at her.

Director – And you are…?

Ariel – Ariel. Ariel Tannenbaum.

The Director sits behind his desk and glances at the sheet of paper in front of him.

Director – That's odd... That's not the name I had on my list… Ariel… *(He finally looks up at her.)* But… you're a woman?

Ariel – Er… Yes. And so what?

Director – So what? But, Miss… Women are not permitted to apply for admission to the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna!

Ariel – This must be a joke…

Director – Ariel… Since your name is somewhat… ambiguous, my secretary must not have noticed.

Ariel – Ambiguous…? Well, yes. It's a Jewish name.

Director – Ah, so you're Jewish as well?

Ariel – Don't tell me Jews aren't allowed to apply to the Academy either.

Director – Regardless, women certainly are not, as I said. And you should have known that… It would have saved both of us an unnecessary waste of time.

Ariel – This is absurd… So, women aren't allowed to become painters? No, this can't be real! *(Sarcastic)* What year is this, exactly?

Director – It is the year 1907, Miss… Do you not know that either?

Ariel – 1907…? *(A smile appears on her lips.)* Oh, I see now… This is a hidden camera show, isn't it?

Director – Television? What on earth is that?

Ariel – And where's the camera?

She gets up and takes a few steps around the room, searching for a camera.

Director – Miss, we are in October 1907. *(He picks up a calendar from his desk and hands it to her.)* It says so right here.

Ariel glances at the calendar, stunned.

Ariel – 1907? That's impossible!

Director – You seem rather unsettled… Would you like a glass of water?

Ariel tries to compose herself and looks around the room.

Ariel – I don't understand… When I arrived here, there was an Egon Schiele painting on that wall.

Director – Egon Schiele? What an odd idea… Yes, he is one of my students. But I would never dream of hanging one of his paintings in my office. He's only a student —barely seventeen! And his style is anything but… academic.

Ariel – Academic?

Director – A decadent style, if you prefer… Sadly, very fashionable these days. But it won't last, mark my words. Schiele, like so many others, is unfortunately under the bad influence of that rogue Klimt.

Ariel – Klimt? Gustav Klimt? You know him too?

Director – I passed by his studio on my way here. He didn't even acknowledge me… Though, to be fair, I nearly ran him over. My carriage lost a wheel, as I said, and veered onto the pavement.

Ariel – You nearly ran over Gustav Klimt?

Director – I almost regret not doing so. This… Secession movement is nothing but a passing fad. In a few months, no one will be talking about it anymore, you'll see.

Ariel – Are you sure…?

Director – That Egon Schiele fellow will never make a career for himself either, believe me. Not as a painter, anyway… Perhaps as an interior decorator… No, all these young artists should take inspiration from their distinguished predecessors, as I have done myself.

Ariel – Their predecessors? You mean…?

Director – Eisenmenger, for example…

Ariel – Who?

Director – August Eisenmenger! You've never heard of him?

Ariel – No…

Director – He's already being called the Austrian Rubens! Surely you've heard of Rubens…?

Ariel – Of course. Do you take me for an idiot?

Director – Well, I don't even know why I'm discussing this with you.

Ariel – No, neither do I… Speculating about the future of young Egon Schiele with his old professor, whose name I don't even know. Actually, who are you, exactly?

Director – Why, Miss, I am Christian Griepenkerl, the Director of the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna!

Ariel – So we really are in 1907…

Director – Are you sure you wouldn't like a glass of water?

Ariel – I'll be fine… Sooner or later, I'll wake up, and this nightmare will be over.

Director – You may stay here for five minutes, and then I will have to ask you to leave. I have other candidates to see, you know…

Ariel – Other candidates?

He glances at the sheet of paper in front of him.

Director – In fact, I don't see your name on my list… I thought you were… *(He checks his list.)* Adolf Hitler.

Ariel – Adolf Hitler?

Director – That's who I had an appointment with… to assess his application.

Ariel – Tell me this isn't real…

Director – He should be arriving any moment now. But you seem surprised… He must be about your age. Do you know him?

Ariel – Adolf Hitler...? Yes, I've heard of him.

The Director picks up a folder from the top of a pile.

Director – A rather eccentric young Austrian who thinks he's a genius painter. I have his file right here… *(He opens the folder and glances at the drawings inside.)* He's not bad at drawing buildings… but he has no talent for portraits. And he hasn't the slightest grasp of anatomy. *(Still examining the drawings.)* He simply can't draw a human figure convincingly. He'd be better off studying architecture… *(He pushes the folder towards her.)* What do you think?

Ariel looks at the drawings, stunned.

Ariel – Did he really draw these…?

Director – If this poor boy paid someone to do these childlike sketches for him, then he's even more foolish than he looks.

Ariel *(glancing at the drawings)* – This is unbelievable… The paint is still fresh…

Director – No, this Adolf Hitler will never go down in history either, that much is certain.

Ariel – Not as a painter, at least…

Director – So, you agree with me… I have no choice but to reject his application.

Ariel *(suddenly, with urgency)* – Whatever you do, don't do that!

Director *(taken aback)* – I beg your pardon...?

She tries to regain her composure.

Ariel – These drawings aren't that bad, after all.

Director – You think so…?

Ariel – I don't know… I feel there's… something there. And you certainly can't say his style isn't academic.

The Director looks at the drawings again.

Director – It's very conventional, indeed, but… academic doesn't mean devoid of sensitivity. No, really… It's utterly flat… There's no soul in these drawings…

Ariel – His lines are rather precise, though.

Director – For landscapes, yes. Perhaps even too precise. They look like photographs. Have you heard of that new invention by the Lumière brothers? The autochrome…

Ariel – The autochrome?

Director – Colour photography, if you prefer. Photography is a devilish invention. It will end up killing painting. And yet, there is no humanity in those images. Any fool can press the button on a camera. That doesn't make them a painter.

Ariel – It's progress… and you can't stop it.

Director – Mark my words, one day they'll invent machines to think for us as well…

Ariel – You have no idea how right you are.

Director – So, what do you find so appealing about these daubs?

Ariel – They are a little naïve, I admit… But he could improve… With good teachers…

Director – Alas, Miss, talent cannot be taught. One can refine one's technique, of course, but if you don't have the artistic spark… What makes a painter isn't dexterity. It's vision. And believe me, this Adolf Hitler has none.

Ariel – Yet, he is absolutely determined to become a painter… And sometimes, thwarting a vocation can be dangerous…

Director – Dangerous? Dangerous for whom?

Ariel – He might experience a certain frustration. Even resentment…

Director – Nothing will stop him from painting on Sundays, to unwind after a week's work. He can hang his canvases in his sitting room if he so wishes. Or give them away as Christmas or birthday presents to his family and friends. But here, we are talking about joining the most prestigious Academy of Fine Arts in the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Perhaps even in the world. I cannot allow this poor boy to indulge in the illusion that he has any future as a painter. No, really, it wouldn't be doing him any favours.

Ariel – But it would be doing an invaluable service to all of humanity, I assure you.

Director – I haven't the faintest idea what you're talking about, Miss…

Ariel – You say these drawings are devoid of all feeling. So now, I ask you to show some humanity, Mr Greenspan.

Director – Griepenkerl. Mr Griepenkerl.

Ariel – One more student or one less—what difference does it make to you?

Director – The number of students we can accept into this Academy is limited, Miss. It makes a difference because he would be taking the place of another candidate—one far more talented and deserving than he is.

Ariel – And what if I asked you as a personal favour…?

Director – And why, pray tell, would I owe you a favour? Are you his sweetheart? Have you come here to plead his case?

Ariel – No, I am not his sweetheart…

The Director examines the file again.

Director – Look, he's even included a few postcards of his own design. He hopes to sell them in the street to earn a little money. To pay the rent on his attic room, he says. No doubt he hopes to make me feel sorry for him…

Ariel – At the very least, that proves his determination… They say Van Gogh didn't sell a single painting in his lifetime. At least Hitler is already selling postcards…

Director – Van Gogh...? Never heard of him.

Ariel – Believe me, in a few years, people will be talking about him a lot.

The Director examines one particular drawing.

Director – No, really, this boy has no artistic sensitivity whatsoever. It's as if the very idea of beauty means nothing to him. I'd even say there's something disturbing about his awkward precision… Something unhealthy. Look how obsessively he's drawn the wall of this respectable house. If we compared it with the original, I'm sure we'd find exactly the same number of bricks. He paints like an accountant. Every brick is accounted for. The figures add up, but the picture is dreadful. But while you're here, let me see your portfolio…

Ariel – I don't know if…

Director – Come on, don't be shy… As I said, women are not allowed to apply, but I can still offer you my personal opinion. As a friendly gesture…

Ariel – Alright…

She hands him her portfolio. He opens it and examines her work. She watches him anxiously, waiting for his reaction.

Director – The style is rather unconventional, that's true…

Ariel – But…?

Director – I must admit, you have a very sure hand with a pencil.

Ariel – So, you would have accepted my application… if I weren't a woman. And a Jewish woman on top of that…

Director – There's no point in discussing it, but… who knows?

Ariel – Times are changing, you know. In a few years, perhaps women will be admitted to the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna.

Director – And why not give them the right to vote while we're at it…

Ariel – Well, yes… Why not?

Director – My God… I hope I won't be around to see that…

Ariel – You won't be, don't worry.

Director – Oh, really?

Ariel – So, you think my drawings are good?

Director – Better than Adolf Hitler's, at any rate… If you wish, I can recommend you to a private tutor. There are excellent ones in Vienna.

Ariel – Listen, sir, right now, it's not my personal fate that concerns me, but that of all humanity. And I have good reason to believe that you should accept young Hitler's application.

The Director looks stunned.

Director – The fate of humanity? Do you seriously think that by turning this fool away and sending him back to selling postcards, I would be depriving the history of art of a great painter?

Ariel – Thwarting a vocation is a huge responsibility…

Director – Don't you think you're being a bit melodramatic? Plenty of candidates are rejected every year… The world still goes on turning.

Ariel – Yes, but him… If you reject his application… he might do something reckless, I'm telling you.

Director – You mean, take his own life? Let me warn you, I do not respond to blackmail.

Ariel – No, not take his own life, unfortunately. At least, not yet…

Director – Then why should I accept this Sunday painter into this prestigious Academy?

Ariel – And what if I told you that this boy, if he doesn't become a painter, will plunge the world into chaos and cause the deaths of nearly a hundred million people?

Director – I would say that either you're mocking me, or you're mad. And in both cases, I must ask you to leave.

Ariel – I'm not mocking you, Mr Greenberg.

Director – Griepenkerl. Mr Griepenkerl, if you please. And tell me, how could you possibly know what this boy will become if he is not accepted into this Academy? Are you a fortune teller? Can you see the future? Do you think you're Nostradamus?

Ariel hesitates for a moment before responding.

Ariel – I know this is hard to believe, but… I come from another time.

Director – Another time? Well, well…

Ariel – I come from the twenty-first century. I was born in 2007. Exactly a hundred years after the year we're in now.

Director – In 2007. Of course.

Ariel – What can I do to convince you?

Director – Convince me that you're a time traveller? Like in that fanciful novel by that young English writer who's all the rage these days…

Ariel – What novel?

Director – The Time Machine, by Wells! You've read it, and it's gone to your head, hasn't it?

Ariel – I'm telling you, I come from the future! It's very important that you believe me…

Director – So, in your time, you have machines that can travel through time?

Ariel – No… Maybe one day, but no… Not yet…

Director – Then how did you get here? To 1907…

Ariel – I have no idea… and that's what worries me. Because I also don't know how to get back to where I came from. And my mother is expecting me home for Shabbat tomorrow…

Director – Your mother…

Ariel – Yes, my mother! If I don't call her within the hour, she's bound to alert the police!

Director *(ironically)* – The border police, you mean…? The borders of time…

Ariel – Do you really think I'm in the mood for jokes?

Director – I don't know… Perhaps you're dreaming.

Ariel – Yes, I considered that. But in that case, you wouldn't be real either… since you're part of this dream.

Director – You're starting to seriously muddle my mind, Miss. Before meeting you, everyone considered me a rational man. Too rational, even, for some of my contemporaries. And now, here I am, discussing time travel with a young woman who could be my granddaughter…

Ariel – Or perhaps it's you who's dreaming, and I have merely appeared in your dream…

Director – Or maybe we're both dreaming the same thing. And none of this is real at all.

Ariel – Like a play, in a way, where we are both the actors.

Director *(sceptical)* – A play…? Where do you come up with all this?

Ariel – If, as some say, life is but a dream, isn't that the very definition of existence? Billions of people sharing the same dream, until they take it for reality.

Director – The same dream… or the same nightmare.

Ariel – The question is, what does our dream mean? That is, if it means the same thing to you as it does to me…

Director – What do you mean?

Ariel – As a young aspiring painter, I dream of saving the world… by changing the course of history. You, as an old academic painter, dream of saving history—at least, the history of art—by ensuring that nothing in the world, and certainly not the way of painting, ever changes.

Director – I think you're raving… You should seek advice from this Dr Freud, whom everyone in Vienna is talking about these days… They say he works wonders with overly excitable young women.

Ariel – You mean hysterical women, I suppose…

Director – We live in strange times, you know… Decadence is everywhere, including in painting.

Ariel – That's exactly my point—you're just an old reactionary… And your stubborn refusal to change anything might very well cause a catastrophe on a planetary scale.

Director – But really, Miss… how could this poor boy, who hardly seems the sharpest tool in the shed, possibly kill so many people?

Ariel – By starting a world war, quite simply.

Director – A world war? That would be a first.

Ariel – In fact, it'll be the second… The first will begin in seven years, in 1914. And the second in 1939.

Director – It's true that we are living in troubled times, but still… Two world wars in less than thirty years? You must be exaggerating…

Ariel – And to think this fool almost drowned when he was four.

Director – Who?

Ariel – Hitler! He accidentally fell into a river. If a passing friend hadn't pulled him out, we wouldn't be discussing his admission to the Academy today.

Director – You would have preferred that this poor boy drowned as a child, and yet now you want him to be admitted to the Academy, despite having none of the required qualities?

Ariel – Admit it, it's rather unsettling.

Director – What is so unsettling?

Ariel – Isn't it strange how little it can take to send history down one path rather than another? If your carriage had run over Hitler on the pavement when it lost its wheel, the problem would have been solved.

Director – You seem to have quite the grudge against this poor fellow…

Ariel – A train doesn't leave on time, and a meeting is missed. A love story never begins, perhaps. A child is never born—a child who might have had an extraordinary destiny. Imagine if Albert Einstein's parents had never met…

Director – Albert who?

Ariel – A genius who broke with the scientific orthodoxy of his day and revolutionised modern physics. Among other things, he showed that if we could travel faster than light, we would travel back in time.

Director – This is absurd. If we could travel back in time, we could change the course of history and, therefore, alter the future you claim to come from. And what if, on your little trip to the past, instead of running over Hitler, you accidentally ran over your maternal grandfather with your carriage when he was still a child? In that case, your mother would never have been born, and therefore, neither would you.

Ariel – And I wouldn't be able to travel back in time to run over my grandfather… That is indeed the paradox pointed out by the greatest physicists.

Director – Without going as far as killing your own grandfather, even the smallest of your actions could, however indirectly, alter the course of history—and you might end up erasing your own existence…

Ariel – To prevent a world war, I'm willing to take that risk. But for that to happen, you must accept Adolf Hitler's application…

Director – That is out of the question… All this rambling is pure madness.

Ariel – How can I prove to you that I truly come from the future?

Ariel paces around the office. As she passes in front of the mirror, the Director suddenly realises that it does not reflect her image.

Director – What kind of sorcery is this?

Ariel – What?

Director – Come back here for a moment…

She steps back in front of the mirror.

Ariel – The mirror…

Director – It doesn't reflect your image!

Ariel – As if I were nothing more than a hologram. My consciousness is here, but my body remains back in the 21st century…

Director – So, you are somehow… split in two…

Ariel – Like those particles that can exist in two places at once… until they are observed. It's the famous experiment known as Schrödinger's Cat, named after the renowned physicist who devised it in 1935!

Director – I beg your pardon?

Ariel – The phenomenon of quantum superposition! As long as a particle remains unobserved, it can exist in two places at once. Only when someone looks at it—you, for example, or my mother—does it appear in one place, ceasing to exist elsewhere.

Director – But this is nonsense… And besides, how do you know all this? Are you a physicist? I thought you were a painter…

Ariel – I have no idea where this knowledge of quantum physics is coming from… I used to sleep through science lessons at school. And my grades were well below average.

Director – Apparently, you were only half-asleep…

Ariel – In any case, this mirror doesn't reflect my image, and that is a fact. So, are you convinced now?

Director – I am convinced… that I've gone mad. I must have hit my head. That carriage accident was probably more serious than I thought. I believed I had escaped unscathed, but perhaps I'm in a coma…

Ariel – When you dream and know you're dreaming, you're already no longer dreaming. When you're mad and you know you're mad, you're not entirely mad anymore.

Director – I think it's you who's driving me mad.

Suddenly, Ariel's mobile phone rings.

Ariel – But…

Director – What on earth is that now?

Ariel reaches into her pocket and takes out her mobile phone.

Ariel – My mobile phone…

Director – A mobile phone? That's impossible…

Ariel – What's truly incredible is that it's ringing… even though I've jumped more than a century back in time.

Director – And who could it possibly be?

Ariel looks at the screen.

Ariel – It's my mother…

Director – Well, answer it!

Ariel – Hello, Mum… Yes, yes, everything's fine… My voice sounds strange? No, no, I assure you. And you? You haven't noticed anything odd...? I don't know… Tell me, Armstrong is still the first man to set foot on the Moon on 20th July 1969, right? Armstrong! No, not the trumpet player—the astronaut! Oh, never mind… No, I'm still with the director here. Actually, I have to go… Yes, I'll call you later.

She hangs up.

Director – So, that was your mother.

Ariel – She was worried about how my interview went, and whether I got into the Academy…

Director – I take it that means women will be allowed to apply in a hundred years' time.

Ariel – But how can I talk on the phone with my mother when I've been transported to 1907? That's strange, isn't it?

Director – You think that's the strange part of this situation? Walking on the Moon… You're completely mad!

Ariel – Yes, I'm starting to wonder if that's actually a possibility worth considering...

Director – And this device… This mobile telephone, as you call it… It's absurd! It's not even connected to a wire, and you expect me to believe it allows you to speak to your mother?

Ariel – The strangest thing is that it's still connected to the internet.

Director – The internet?

Ariel – I even have access to Google! Here, watch… I'll type "Adolf Hitler"… And there!

She shows him the screen of her phone. The Director, horrified, watches as the images scroll past.

Director – My God! This is appalling…

Ariel – This is what you'll be responsible for if you reject Adolf Hitler's application to the Vienna Academy of Fine Arts…

Director – Me?

Ariel – Here, now I'll type "Christian…"

Director – Christian Griepenkerl.

Ariel – Look at this! No one will remember you as a painter, but you'll go down in history as the man who triggered the Second World War.

He glances quickly at the screen.

Director – Let's suppose, for a moment, that I believe you… Then you can foresee the future?

Ariel – Not my future. But for me, your future is the past.

Director – I'm not sure I want to know my own future. And even less the date of my death…

Ariel – I understand that…

Director – Can you at least tell me who will be considered the greatest painter of the 20th century?

Ariel – I'd say… Picasso, without a doubt.

Director – Picasso? Never heard of him… Can you show me one of his paintings?

Ariel types on her phone.

Ariel – Are you really sure?

He nods, and she shows him the screen. He stares at it, stunned.

Director – You're right, this must be a nightmare…

Ariel – Yes, compared to Picasso, Egon Schiele's style would almost seem academic…

Director – And I suppose there's no way to stop all this.

Ariel – Stop Cubism? Certainly not. But do you realise how much responsibility rests on your shoulders? If you reject Adolf Hitler's application, he'll nurse a deadly resentment. He'll rise to lead the Nazi Party, come to power in Germany and plunge the world into chaos.

Director – And if I allow him to enter the Academy…?

Ariel – What do you have to lose? At worst, he'll be just one more bad painter… But at least he'll be a man at peace, having achieved his dream. And you will have saved humanity!

Director – It's not that simple… This terrible history has already happened, since you know about it. So, if we change the past, do we change history, or do we merely create an alternative timeline? A history that, for all we know, might turn out even worse than the first.

Ariel – Worse? What could possibly be worse than the Third Reich?

Director – I don't know… A Third Reich that lasts a thousand years, perhaps. How long did this one last?

Ariel – Twelve years.

Director – Then I take it this Hitler did not win the world war you speak of.

Ariel – No, he didn't… In the end, he lost. The forces of good triumphed.

Director – Who's to say that if Hitler becomes a painter, someone even more cunning won't rise to power in Germany and lead this war? And this time, the forces of evil might actually win…

Ariel – I'll ask ChatGPT about that too…

Director – ChatGPT? What on earth is that?

Ariel – An artificial intelligence.

Director – You mean this machine is more intelligent than you?

Ariel – Well, it certainly knows more than I do.

She types something and looks at the screen.

Director – Well?

Ariel – It's the theory of the multiverse. Multiple alternative worlds existing in different dimensions of the universe. Perhaps an infinite number. Covering every possible outcome…

The Director looks completely bewildered.

Director – This is all utterly preposterous… Listen, you seem like an intelligent young woman, but somewhat overexcited.

Ariel – Completely mad, you mean?

Director – In any case, clearly very fixated on her mother… If I may offer you some advice, Miss, start by freeing yourself from your mother's influence before you try to save the world. Even if that phone has no wire—cut the cord!

Ariel – So you think that's it? A delusion of omnipotence? I want to kill Hitler, but in reality, it's my mother I want to get rid of?

Director – Would you like to lie down on this couch and tell me all about it…?

Ariel – That could take years, I'm afraid…

Director – You're right… Dr Freud lives just a few streets away. I can give you his address if you like.

Ariel – And if all of this is just a dream… maybe I don't even live in Vienna. Maybe I'm not even a painter. Worse still… do I even exist at all?

Director – Either way, I cannot indulge your whims. This young Hitler is not worthy of joining our prestigious school, and that is final.

Ariel – Then I have no choice but to kill him. That would be even more certain.

Director – You're joking…

Ariel – You said he's arriving any moment now… and he has no reason to be on his guard, since he hasn't committed any crimes yet. The only problem is, I've never killed anyone before either. Could you help me?

Director – But I've never killed anyone either! And I'm certainly not about to start today—with a candidate, no matter how poor his application…

Ariel – I don't have a weapon on me. *(She looks at the desk and picks up a letter opener.)* This will do. A quick strike to the carotid… My anatomy lessons will finally come in handy.

Director – You're completely deranged!

Ariel – You don't understand! This is about saving the lives of a hundred million innocent people! Including six million Jews, exterminated in death camps simply for being born Jewish!

Director – Saving innocents by preemptively killing another?

Ariel – I'd only be killing one, rest assured…

Director – I imagine a political leader alone isn't enough to start a world war. He needs accomplices. Are you planning to kill all of them too… preemptively?

Ariel – I don't know…

Director – And this dictator, Hitler, did he seize power through a coup?

Ariel – No. He came to power through the ballot box. Unfortunately…

Director – Then you would also have to kill all his voters… preemptively. Do you intend to exterminate half the German population to prevent a war?

Ariel – I don't know anymore… No… I suppose I'll settle for eliminating Hitler.

Director – A crime is still a crime, Miss Tannenbaum. If we started eliminating everyone in advance who might harm humanity, where would it end? And isn't this very idea of eugenics precisely what you claim to be fighting against?

Ariel – Fine, but we're not talking about probability here—we're talking about a certain future! I know it, because I come from there!

Director – Regardless, I cannot be a party to such an act.

Ariel seems to come to her senses. She puts the letter opener back on the desk.

Ariel – You're probably right… You know what? I'll take that glass of water after all. And then I'll leave, I promise…

The Director goes out. Dramatic music. Working from memory, Ariel hurriedly sketches a portrait of Christian Griepenkerl and slips it into Hitler's file. The music stops. The Director returns.

Director – Here's your glass of water.

She drinks.

Ariel – I'll be going now. But please, I beg you—take one last look at his file…

He opens the file again and sees the drawing.

Director – Well, I hadn't noticed this sketch before…

Ariel – But it's a portrait of you!

Director – Ah yes, so it is. And I must admit, quite well executed.

Ariel – It shows great insight into human nature. He has clearly seen through you. Your hidden genius beneath that modest air. Your charisma, tinged with benevolence…

He seems touched by the flattery before snapping out of it.

Director – Right, that's quite enough now. You're going to have to leave, Miss. I greeted young Hitler while fetching your water. He's waiting in my secretary's office. And after what you've told me about your criminal intentions, I'd rather you didn't cross paths with him…

Ariel – I'm going. I don't know where, but I'm going…

She exits. The Director looks at the drawing again, a perplexed expression on his face. A knock at the door.

Director – Come in!

Blackout.

Scene 3

Lights up.

Ariel is asleep on a chair. She wakes up, disoriented, and looks around. The computer has reappeared on the desk. Emperor Franz Joseph has been replaced by a portrait of Donald Trump, possibly with a small moustache resembling Hitler's. Ariel barely has time to be surprised before the same Director enters, now dressed in contemporary fashion.

Director – Sorry to have kept you waiting. I got a flat tyre on the way and didn't have a spare. Had to take an Uber to get here.

Ariel – An Uber…? So we're no longer in 1907…

Director – 1907? What an odd idea… Why 1907?

Ariel – Forgive me… I must have had a nightmare. And… you are the Director of the Academy of Fine Arts, aren't you?

Director – You seem surprised… But we did have an appointment, didn't we? To review your application…

Ariel – Of course! No, I… Excuse me, I didn't sleep well.

Director – Right, then, let's have a look…

Ariel hands him her portfolio. He opens it and studies the drawings one by one in silence, looking doubtful. She watches him anxiously.

Ariel – I could show you others, of course…

Director – No, no, it's just… Your style isn't very conventional, of course, but… you certainly know how to draw.

Ariel – Rather unconventional…?

Director – You know, we've returned to a certain academicism… And I have superiors to answer to.

Ariel – So, would you say my style is…?

Director – Without going so far as to call it degenerate art, this is hardly in line with the aesthetic and moral principles of our Academy.

Ariel – Moral principles?

Director – Nudes are no longer permitted, Miss. Surely you knew that?

Ariel – This has to be a joke… Unless this nightmare is still going…

Director – A nightmare?

Ariel – I dreamt I was in this very office, in 1907, at the moment Adolf Hitler's application was rejected.

Director – Adolf who?

Ariel – Adolf Hitler! Surely you know who I mean?

Director – No… Should I?

She looks around and notices the portrait of Donald Trump.

Ariel – You have a portrait of Donald Trump in your office?

Director – He is the first President of the United States of the Free World. Don't tell me you weren't aware…

Ariel – The United States of the Free World?

Director – And Austria is proud to be its 74th state.

Ariel – So… I really did change the course of history…

Director – Are you sure you're feeling alright, Miss?

Ariel – No, to be honest, I feel a little dizzy.

Director – Sit down there, I'll fetch you a Coca-Cola.

Ariel – I'd rather have a glass of water, if you don't mind.

Director – Water? What an odd request… But Miss, no one has drunk water for a very long time in the United States of the Free World.

Ariel – And why is that?

Director – Why? Miss, if you wish to have any chance of becoming an artist in this country, why is a question I suggest you erase from your vocabulary…

The Director exits. Ariel sits down, completely shaken. She checks the screen of her mobile phone and starts typing.

Ariel *(devastated)* – No… The Second World War never happened… but Donald Trump is the President for Life of the United States of the Free World.

She keeps scrolling through her phone, reading in horror. The Director returns. Ariel looks up at him—he is pointing a taser-like device at her.

Director – I'm sorry, Miss. I tried to plead your case, but I have my orders… And we cannot tolerate such deviant behaviour in our Academy…

He pulls the trigger. She collapses.

Blackout.

Scene 4

Lights up.

Ariel wakes up again. She is still wearing the beanie that hides her red hair. She looks around. The Egon Schiele painting and the computer are back in place. The Director enters, dressed as he was before.

Director – Sorry to have kept you waiting. I got a flat tyre on the way and didn't have a spare. Had to take an Uber to get here.

Ariel – I almost don't dare ask what year it is… And whether you've ever heard of Adolf Hitler.

The Director looks at her, obviously puzzled.

Director – Are you alright, Miss? You seem a little… unsettled.

Ariel – No, no, I assure you, everything's fine…

Director – So, you are Miss…

He glances at the list on his desk.

Ariel – Tannenbaum… Ariel Tannenbaum…

Director – That's right.

Ariel – You don't have anything against women… or against Jews, do you?

The Director looks even more perplexed.

Director – *Our only selection criterion is artistic merit, I assure you… May I see your portfolio?*

Ariel – Of course.

She hands him her portfolio. He examines its contents. Ariel watches him anxiously, but he remains expressionless at first.

Director – *I must say, these drawings are excellent.*

Ariel – So, you don't think it's degenerate art?

Director – You have a very distinctive style, it's true. But that's precisely what we expect from our students at this Academy. Technique is something we can teach—but talent cannot be learned. We're here to guide artists, not to train house painters.

Ariel – Which is why, I imagine, the Academy once rejected Adolf Hitler's application.

The Director looks surprised again.

Director – Well, in any case, I don't think I'd be overstepping by saying that we'll be accepting yours.

Ariel – *That's a relief! Because, as you well know, when the Vienna Academy of Fine Arts rejects a candidate, one always wonders what they'll do next…*

Director – Funny you should say that. I was just discussing this with a colleague on the admissions panel this morning. One of our candidates, already an excellent painter, also happens to be a mathematical prodigy. And what if, by accepting her, we were depriving humanity of the next Einstein…?

Ariel – *Don't worry, in my case, I'm hopeless at maths.*

Director – We do have a great responsibility. By rejecting a candidate, we may drive them to desperate extremes. But by accepting them, we might also turn them away from a future that would have suited them far better…

Ariel – That's true. A person's fate is shaped by a series of choices.

Director – Our own choices—but also the choices of others.

Ariel – And the fate of humanity is the sum of all these individual fates.

Director – But how can we be certain that what seems like the right choice today won't have catastrophic consequences tomorrow?

Ariel – On the other hand, even the harshest failures sometimes pave the way for remarkable ascents…

Director – If Hitler had passed his entrance exam to the Academy, he would probably never have become the worst dictator in history.

Ariel – And if Donald Trump hadn't gone bankrupt in the casino business, he might never have become President of the United States…

Director – He wouldn't have treated the world like a casino… and he wouldn't have done to America what he did to Atlantic City—ruining the investors who had foolishly placed their trust in him, before walking away without paying his debts.

Ariel – But isn't the world one enormous casino? We choose the numbers we bet on, but chance decides whether any of them will come up.

Director – So freedom is nothing but an illusion? The freedom to put our faith in one chance outcome rather than another…

Ariel – Does chance itself really exist? "God does not play dice," as Einstein said.

Director – That's the determinist hypothesis—which excludes all notion of free will.

Ariel – And therefore, all responsibility and guilt.

Director – Even our personal choices would be the inevitable result of forces beyond our control.

Ariel – I refuse to accept that we are merely robots, following a pre-programmed script.

Director – Robots, perhaps… but ones endowed with consciousness—which makes us mere spectators of our own lives.

Ariel – In any case, once we've made a choice, there's no going back.

Director – One can always change one's mind.

Ariel – But that's another choice—it doesn't undo the first.

Director – So, we are nothing more than puppets, controlled by invisible strings, manipulated by fate, playing out an inevitable tragedy over which we have no control —because, in the end, we have only one possible path.

Ariel – Unless one could travel through time.

Director – Travel through time?

Ariel – Go back into the past to change our decisions.

Director – But that's impossible, isn't it?

Ariel – No, of course not. Except in dreams…

Director – You have an interest in philosophy, I see, Miss?

Ariel – Like religions, philosophies have always been content to offer fools a view of the world that fits their narrow minds.

Director – Unlike science, aren't the questions posed by philosophy meant to remain unanswered?

Ariel – If philosophers can't answer their questions, perhaps it's because they're asking the wrong ones. They try to understand the world from a human-centred point of view. Because human beings are born and die, they assume everything must have a beginning and an end. And because people seek meaning in life by setting themselves goals, they assume the universe must have a purpose too. But shouldn't we reconsider what it means to be human in light of what science is beginning to reveal about the mysteries of the universe?

Director – Most people, sadly, would rather put their faith in God than in science. It's far less exhausting…

Ariel – A God who created us to be at the centre of all things.

Director – According to the Bible, God created the Earth first, then a few celestial bodies around it for decoration.

Ariel – But if we feel like we're at the centre of the universe, it's only because our short-sightedness allows us to see nothing more than a tiny halo around us. Most of the universe remains invisible. And the universe is expanding so rapidly that the light from its edges will never reach us.

Director – "The eternal silence of these infinite spaces" already terrified Blaise Pascal.

Ariel – What religion teaches us is self-centred blindness. What science teaches us is humility and curiosity.

A beat.

Director – I'm beginning to wonder if, by accepting you into this Academy, I might be depriving the world of a great philosopher—the one who will revolutionise 21st-century thought. I wouldn't want to be responsible for another thwarted vocation…

Ariel – Perhaps… If we combine quantum superposition with entanglement and apply them on a macroscopic scale, we could begin to develop a theory of consciousness. A theory of the persistence of what philosophers and priests pompously call the soul. I exist here because I'm here to observe my own existence.

Director – "I think, therefore I am," said Descartes…

Ariel – And at my death, when others observe my absence, I will instantly exist elsewhere, beneath another sky, for other eyes.

Director – So, like Schrödinger's cat, we are both alive here and dead elsewhere? And vice versa?

Ariel – The real question is whether these two versions of ourselves can communicate. But perhaps that's going too far, isn't it?

Director – I must admit, this is all quite dizzying… Are you absolutely sure you don't want to pursue a scientific career instead?

Ariel – Art, too, can be a way of questioning the world. And what if no vocation were ever really thwarted? What if, in the end, we were destined to play every part? What if, to borrow from Baudelaire, each of us were, in turn, both victim and executioner?

Director – Well, Miss, you have convinced me. Welcome to the Academy! Congratulations on your independent mind and remarkable maturity.

Ariel – Thank you! My mother will be delighted!

The Director looks surprised by her last remark. He hands her a form.

Director – I'll leave you to fill in this personal details form. I'll be back in a moment.

She takes the form and produces a pen. The Director goes out. Ariel begins to fill in the form. Her mobile rings. This time she answers with an enthusiasm in sharp contrast to her irritation during the earlier calls.

Ariel – Hello, Mum! I'm so happy to hear from you! *(Her mother is clearly surprised by her enthusiasm.)* No, honestly, I'm fine… Yes, I got in! Yes, me too… I'll tell you all about it tomorrow… Love you! *(She catches sight of the calendar on the desk.)* Mum! Just one little question… What year is it, exactly? *(She is surprised by the answer.)* Oh… But the Rolling Stones are still the greatest band in rock history, aren't they? No, not the Beatles, the Rolling Stones! You've never heard of the Rolling Stones? Well, we'll talk about that on Friday…

She puts her phone away. The Director returns. Without thinking, she takes off her beanie, revealing her red hair. The Director looks stunned.

Director – I'm terribly sorry, Miss… but we won't be accepting your application after all.

Ariel – Why not?

Director – You didn't tell me you were a redhead…

Ariel – And?

Director – But Miss… redheads are not admitted to the Vienna Academy of Fine Arts.

Ariel remains stunned.

Blackout.

Scene 5

Lights up.

Ariel wakes up again and looks around. This time, a portrait of herself hangs on the wall. In it, she has a fierce, military bearing, wears a red wig and a uniform covered in medals. The Director enters, also in uniform, and salutes her, clicking his heels together.

Director – *Madam… I await your orders…*

Ariel – But… who are you?

Director – *I am your Chief of Staff, Madam President! Our army is ready. We are only awaiting your command to invade Poland.*

Ariel looks utterly stunned at first but then tries to compose herself.

Ariel – Of course… That is to say… I think I'd better discuss it with my mother first, don't you?

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

All of Jean-Pierre Martinez's plays can be downloaded

free of charge from his websites:

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