

La Comédiathèque

The Rope

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Martinez



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The Rope

Jean-Pierre Martinez

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In a country ruled by a bloodthirsty tyrant where opposition to the regime is brutally repressed, a doctor and a catholic priest are confronted with a situation forcing them to face the conflicting nature of their sacred duties, and to reconcile these with their duty as citizens. The stakes couldn't be higher: the dictator is facing a life-or-death situation and their confrontation could lead to either the survival or downfall of the regime.

Characters

A doctor

A catholic priest

The practice of a medical officer located inside the Presidential Palace. There is nothing to suggest a specific location or time but above the desk a majestic portrait of a general in full regalia and covered with medals indicate that the events are taking place in a country ruled by a tyrant. The doctor, wearing a white lab coat, is sat behind a desk. He can be of any age, but his age will influence his characterization. He removes a medical image from a folder, rises and walks to an imaginary window located at the front of the stage to get a better look. The phone rings. He walks back to his desk, puts the image back in the folder and picks up the phone.

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

A catholic priest wearing a black cassock enters the room. He can be any age, but his age, and the age difference with the doctor, will influence his character and their relationship.

Priest – Captain...

The doctor stands to greet him.

Doctor – Good morning, Father... Or should I say Lieutenant? You are a military officer too, after all.

Priest – We are no longer soldier monks fighting for God like the Knights Templar. I am first and foremost the Palace chaplain. Just like you are first and foremost a medical doctor, I imagine. Neither of us are meant to be assigned to combat units, am I right? Our mission is to support our comrades and help them each in our field of expertise.

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

Priest – I can call you Doctor if you prefer.

Doctor – You can call me whatever you like, Father ... As long as it's not "my son" ...

Priest – I'll try to remember that.

Doctor – In any case, thank you for coming so quickly. In fact, you're the very first one. But please, take a seat ... Can I offer you some coffee? A Danish ...

Priest – Thank you, no. *(He sits)* So ... it's for a vaccine, is that right?

Doctor – You aren't afraid of needles, I hope ...

Priest – No ... However, I have to confess I wasn't able to find my vaccination records.

Doctor – Don't worry about it, none of my patients have ever been able to provide their vaccination records. I'm not even sure I could find mine if I had to.

Priest – In that case, I'm all yours, Doctor.

Doctor – Everyone in the Palace will have to get it, you know ... With all these viruses going around ... The General is as healthy as ever, but he's no spring chicken. Even if he hardly ever ventures outside the Palace any longer, he must be protected from contamination from the outside world as best we can. And that means we have to vaccinate his entourage. And all those who might come in contact with him.

Priest – Of course. What we used to call a *cordon sanitaire* I think ...

Doctor – Let's hope this method works better in medicine than it did in politics ...

Priest – I pray for the General every day, but I completely understand that science also has an important role to play.

Doctor – Yes ... we both tackle a different aspect of the same problem. As personal physician to the General, I provide care for his body. As his spiritual advisor, you provide care for his soul.

Priest – I'm not sure who has the hardest job...

The doctor appears surprised by this comment discretely subversive, which encourages him to make a confidence.

Doctor – Indeed, we are living in challenging times. As Palace doctor I am not directly confronted to the problems my colleagues have to deal with on the outside, but I know that these past few days there has been a steady stream of wounded admitted to hospital.

Priest – The recent riots have made a lot of victims. When medicine can't help these poor souls any longer, I provide them some comfort before they pass.

Doctor – The riots ... more like their merciless repression.

Priest – Well, we can't let public disorder prevail, can we ...? Let's hope a peaceful solution can be found quickly.

Doctor – Hope ... Hope is only a strategy for the Church ... Those who take to the streets make demands.

Priest – Between hoping and demanding maybe there's room for compromise. You don't believe in the possibility of a democratic transition?

Doctor – A democratic transition ...? When the opposition leader was arrested and thrown in jail without even the pretence of a trial?

Priest – I didn't say I approved of the methods used ...

Doctor – Repression is escalating every day ... I am worried we're heading towards a civil war. And after a war breaks out there is no room for compromises anymore. Peace is made between the loser who is forced to surrender, and the winner who imposes their terms.

Priest – If there was a war there would be no winners ... No one wins a war ... Are you a man of Faith, Doctor?

Doctor – I attend church every Sunday with my family ... I like the experience ... I believe in some things ... Certain values ...

Priest – That's a start ...

Doctor – I would love to believe more in your God, Father. But these days, there's so many reasons not to ...

Priest – Practice makes perfect, as they say. And sometimes people find their way back to Faith through prayer ... That's why rituals play such a critical role in all religions.

Doctor – Until recently I went to church mainly as a way to feel part of a community. But in our country, those who worship have become a faction that I'm not sure I want to be a part of.

Priest – Regrettably, the Church has been weaponised by those in power since the dawn of time.

Doctor – To some it's merely a tool to wield more power over the people.

Priest – That's why it's important to separate faith and religion, to believe in God even if you are wary of the Church.

Doctor – That's why it's even more important still to believe in our humanity, surely. Do you believe in our humanity, Father?

Priest – I believe in the possibility of redemption before Our Lord and Saviour. The rest I leave in the capable hands of the Law of Men.

Doctor – I see ... Render unto Caesar what is Caesar's ...? And wash your hands of it, is that right? Even when Caesar has become a tyrant?

The priest appears uncomfortable.

Priest – My role involves a lot of listening and I'm used to hearing all sorts of things, Captain. And I do not have the makings of an informant. Regardless, I would advise you to be more cautious. We are in the Palace, not in a confession booth, and walls sometimes have ears ...

Doctor – Come now, Father ... You are not a monk. You don't live in a monastery shut off from the rest of the world. Silence and inaction is complicity, you know that ... You hold some responsibility, too ...

Priest – Of course ... Neither one of us can shirk our responsibilities. I am but a man, just like you. Us priests also have sins to confess, you know ...

Doctor – The confession of a priest, that can't be that hard to hear ... Some vanity ... A little gluttony... Temptation perhaps ... On the other hand, hearing the confession of a bloodthirsty dictator every Sunday before mass ... And then having to absolve him of his crimes ... That can't be easy...

Priest – I'm sure you'll understand that I could not possibly comment given the seal of secrecy imposed by my role as confessor... But I feel there's something more specific on your mind...

Doctor – Indeed, it's not just for a vaccine that I asked you to come see me.

Priest – I am all ears ...

The doctor appears to hesitate.

Doctor – I don't know whether you've heard this story before. When he was a child, Hitler fell in an icy river one winter. One of his friends risked his life to jump in and save him. This heroic friend later became a priest ...

Priest – I had never heard that ... And what do you make of that story?

Doctor – If this kind soul had let the young Adolf drown in the river, the course of history would have been changed, wouldn't it?

Priest – Most likely ...

Doctor – It's said that from evil, sometimes good can arise. That implies that good deeds can sometimes have evil consequences.

Priest – Sometimes, sure.

Doctor – Hence this philosophical question, which could be the subject of a dissertation: is saving the life of a drowning tyrant truly a good deed?

Priest – But in the story he was only a child ...

Doctor – Correct ...

Priest – A child whose destiny wasn't necessarily set in stone.

Doctor – Indeed ...

Priest – That child's destiny would have been entirely different if his life had taken a different path. For example, he might have become a painter if he hadn't twice failed the entrance exam to the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna ...

Doctor – Yes, it's possible.

Priest – Are you laying the blame for the Holocaust at the feet of the exam review board?

Doctor – I don't know ...

Priest – At the end of the day, a man's destiny is the outcome of a multitude of consecutive random events.

Doctor – But what if those random events weren't really random? What if we were just the insignificant consequence of those events that define us? What if everything was already written?

Priest – In that case, it was already written that Hitler would survive his near-drowning accident. And that he'd fail his entrance exams at the Fine Arts Academy. And no one is responsible for what he did later on. Except himself, of course.

Doctor – So you believe that determinism can be overcome by free will?

Priest – What I do know is that no one can predict the future with any degree of certainty. As a medical doctor, you save lives. Including children's lives. And you have no idea what these children will become later in life ...

Doctor – Yes, but what if I did know ...? Stay with me here. What if I was the one who witnessed young Adolf's near-drowning accident. And what if I knew what he would become. A monster ...

Priest – That's an absurd hypothesis, like I said ... And so what? You would have let this child drown ...?

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

The priest freezes, as if time stopped, and a change in stage lighting indicates that the doctor is breaking the fourth wall and delivers the following lines to the audience, temporarily suspending the play's action.

Doctor – Picture the scene ... You're walking along a river when you spot a child drowning. You know this child is Adolf Hitler, the future dictator. Do you throw him a rope to help him out or not? You don't even have to risk your life by jumping in... Or do you pretend you haven't seen him? You don't have to choose between being a hero or living with a death on your conscience for the rest of your life. You just have to make a decision. He's crying for your help. What do you do? Do you throw him a rope to save him or do you let him die? That's not an easy question to answer, is it?

A beat.

Doctor – Who would throw him a rope? Raise your hand ... *(A pause to give the audience time to raise their hand)* And who would look the other way and continue on their walk? Raise your hand ... *(Another pause to give the audience time to raise their hand)* Ok ... And now ... What if it wasn't young Hitler but a politician who could potentially become a tyrant if they were elected. Maybe like ... You know who ... Would you give them a helping hand or not? That's not an easy question to answer either, is it? Is there an obvious answer borne out of our moral values ... or should it be answered on a case-by-case basis? And if so, how do you decide? What criteria do you use to determine who dies and who lives?

The stage lighting returns to the default setting, as if this aside never happened. The play picks up where it was left off.

Priest – I feel those questions aren't just rhetorical.

Doctor – Indeed, I am in need of advice. But you said so yourself, we are not in a confession booth ...

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

Doctor – And you couldn't repeat what I told you to anyone?

Priest – Yes, that's the principle of confession. Much like the doctor-patient privilege you are subject to.

Doctor – But ... At the present moment I don't see myself waiting in line among members of the public for my turn in the confession booth.

Priest – A priest can hear a confession anywhere.

Doctor – What, like here? Right now?

Priest – As the Palace chaplain, I am at your disposal.

Doctor – Very well, then I would like you to hear my confession, Father ...

The priest goes from a casual sitting position to the position of a priest about to hear a confession, and he signs himself.

Priest – Let us pray. May God grant us the grace to admit our sins.

Doctor – Amen ...

Priest – I am listening, my son.

Doctor – I have a moral dilemma I'd like your opinion on, Father.

Priest – I will do my very best to provide guidance. According to the doctrine of our Lord and Saviour.

Doctor – I examined the General a few weeks ago. A routine exam. And I discovered he had cardiac condition ... later confirmed by further tests.

Priest – A condition ...?

Doctor – Specifically, an abdominal aortic aneurysm ... Turns out even dictators have a heart ...

Priest – That's rather unfortunate, indeed ... And it's a severe condition I imagine ...

Doctor – It is.

Priest – Can it be treated?

Doctor – With surgery and follow-up treatment, yes. If it's caught in time.

Priest – So in what way is this a dilemma for you?

Doctor – If I report this condition to one of my colleagues, the General will receive treatment and he'll live for years ...

Priest – Yes, and ...?

Doctor – And if I don't report his condition he will only have weeks to live. Days, maybe. And the dictatorship will likely not survive him.

The priest is momentarily speechless.

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

Doctor – It's the perfect opportunity to change the course of history, isn't it? To topple this regime while saving the lives of countless opponents who are executed every day in the prison courtyards. Or those who fall under police fire as they protest in the streets. What happened to the idea of that democratic transition you were talking about just now?

Priest – By sending a patient to his death after he placed his life in your hands?

Doctor – To save scores of others, yes. Why not consider this as an act of resistance?

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

Doctor (*reciting the Hippocratic Oath*) – I will never cause death deliberately. *Primum non nocere* ...

Priest – First, do no harm ...

Doctor – That's precisely why I mentioned a moral dilemma ... I am caught between a rock and hard place. The doctor in me demands that I only see a patient and that I do everything possible to save him. But the citizen in me cannot ignore the crimes he has committed and wishes to let him die to prevent him from committing more.

Priest – You forget a third viewpoint, the military man, who must obey orders.

Doctor – Obey orders ... If that was a valid excuse, the Nuremberg Trials would have all resulted in acquittals. The accused all swore they just were just obeying orders ...

Priest – You asked for my advice, didn't you?

Doctor – I didn't say I would take it ... But I'm listening ...

Priest – First, the doctor should carry out his duty of care, honouring his oath. Then the military man is free to ignore the orders he believes are unlawful. And finally, the citizen can rise against the regime, even resorting to acts of resistance if necessary.

Doctor – But today, both the military man and the citizen are powerless against a repressive system that is terrifyingly efficient. Only the doctor can put an end to the dictatorship, by hastening the dictator's demise.

Priest – So as a doctor you believe you have power of life and death over your patients? Are you playing God?

Doctor – Since your God allows a tyrant to remain in power, it falls to men to step in and kick him off his pedestal.

Priest – But as a doctor you have been entrusted with a sacred duty, like I have. Any patient has the right to medical care, regardless of their past, just like any accused has the right to a fair trial, regardless of their crimes.

Doctor (*ironically*) – And just like any sinner has the right to forgiveness, regardless of the gravity of their sins, right?

Priest – If they genuinely repent, yes.

Doctor – Did the General tell you during his confession that he repented his crimes?

Priest – That falls under the Seal of Confession I am subject to.

Doctor – Even if he does repent, it hasn't stopped him from continuing to order the relentless execution of ever more political opponents. With all due respect, you don't seem to have a lot of influence as his spiritual advisor.

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

Doctor – You don't sound convinced.

Priest – It's not my place to judge ... I believe in repentance and in forgiveness. And I chose to serve God.

Doctor – And I chose to serve men.

Priest – Precisely. All men. No ifs, no buts, no maybes. Doctors, priests, lawyers ... we are the only people in which even the worst of humanity can have absolute trust. That's our commitment. It's a difficult and thankless mission, but it's critical. We are the last bastion protecting humanity from savagery ... The very last recourse for those condemned by the rest of the world, but who still harbour a spark of humanity.

Doctor – Sure, but while we're sitting here debating, citizens are being tortured and shot.

Priest – And you would want to save Humanity using perjury and murder? You would pretend to end a tyranny by using the very methods used by the tyrant? By breaking the oath you solemnly took in the presence of your peers?

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

The priest freezes and the stage lighting changes for another aside with the audience.

Doctor (*to the audience*) – If you were a doctor, what would you do? If you were in my shoes? (*He picks up the folder from his desk and shows it to the audience*) Who would hand the patient file to a colleague so they could save the General? Let's have a show of hands! (*He pauses long enough to give the audience time to raise their hand*) And who would put this folder back in the filing cabinet and let the tyrant die? (*He pauses long enough to give the audience time to raise their hand*) But you're not doctors, are you ...?

The stage lighting returns to the default setting, as if this aside never happened. The play picks up where it left off.

Priest – Are you for the death penalty, Doctor?

Doctor – No ... Not generally speaking, no.

Priest – That's a simple yes or no question. There can be no exceptions or else there will be nothing but exceptions. Life is sacred. Even in countries with secular governments the sanctity of life is the reason the death penalty has been abolished ... So that even the worse criminals are not denied their last bit of humanity ... and to allow them a chance at redemption, as remote as it is.

Doctor – I support women who want to get an abortion. I even support medically assisted dying under certain circumstances. As a doctor, I am sometimes called to take a life, in contradiction to the Hippocratic Oath. But I'd like to ask you the question. Are you pro-life, under any circumstances?

Priest – As a priest, yes.

Priest – So you oppose all abortions, even in cases of rape, or when the life of the mother is at risk? Do you also oppose ending the unbearable sufferings of someone for whom nothing more can be done?

Priest – As a man, I am not insensitive to human distress...

Doctor – So you also sometimes place the man before the priest, when it comes to addressing the difficult questions life sometimes throws at us. Rather than hide behind big, moral principles that occasionally lead to inhumane decisions.

Priest – As a priest, I cannot take anyone's life ... But if a doctor were to confess having done so in very specific circumstances, and if they were to genuinely repent, I would give them absolution.

Doctor – In that case, I just need to confess after the death of the General. To ease my conscience, and yours.

Priest – So you've already made your decision ...

Doctor – Well, you've agreed to give me absolution.

Priest – You are literally considering letting a man die. I can't pre-emptively give you absolution.

Doctor – Look, the General is an old man... I would only be speeding things up by a few months. Perhaps even just a few days ... It can hardly be called murder ... More like a way to avoid futile, aggressive end-of-life treatment.

Priest – You're splitting hairs. I can't let you go ahead with this abomination.

Doctor – You would go as far as to report me?

Priest – It is my duty.

Doctor – But you are bound by the Seal of Confession!

Priest – Yes, but there are exceptions to this confidentiality requirement ... For example, if someone's life is in danger.

Doctor – I confided in you ... And now you tell me that confession isn't an absolute principle ...! Even though in the past the Church has remained silent to cover up much more abject crimes ...

Priest – If someone confesses their intent to harm themselves or others, I have the duty to inform the authorities. This is required by God's Law as well as by our judicial system. If I didn't, I would be complicit of the crime under the law ... Lawyers who discover their client is planning a murder have the duty to report it. Doctors too, as you very well know.

Doctor – But I'm not going to kill anyone. I'm just going to let nature take its course ... Letting God act in His mysterious ways ...

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

Doctor – So you're going to go back on your oath too?

Priest – I told you, this is about saving a life, so I am not bound by any oath.

Doctor – Even if by reporting me to the authorities of this totalitarian regime you're signing my death warrant?

Priest – Just fulfil your doctor's duty and you won't have anything to worry about ...

Doctor – I will fulfil my citizen's duty.

Priest – Then you give me no choice ...

Doctor – Are you sure it is the priest and not the officer who is so keen to report me?

Priest – I am a priest before being an officer. But I am a man before being a priest. And as a man I cannot let you take the life of another.

The phone rings. The doctor picks up.

Doctor – Yes Sergeant? I'm listening ... Understood ... Yes ... I'll come as soon as possible ... (*He hangs up*) The leader of the opposition was found hanged in his cell ...

The priest is visibly affected.

Priest – That's terrible ...

Doctor – They want me to confirm the death and to sign the death certificate confirming it is a suicide. As you can see, Father, the General doesn't bother hiding his despicable acts. He does it all in the open. And it falls upon me, as the medical examiner, to cover up these murders as suicides.

Priest – It's disgraceful ... And you're going to play along with this masquerade?

Doctor – But a minute ago you wanted me to obey orders!

Priest – I agree with you on that: when orders are illegal it's our duty to ignore them.

Doctor – I told you how I could end this never-ending increase in violence ...

The action stops once more and the stage lighting changes for another aside with the audience.

Priest *(to the audience)* – Given I can't rely on God, I'm going to have to seek your opinion ... Imagine you are a priest. What would you do if you were in my shoes? Who among you would report the doctor, after hearing what he confessed, so that the life of a man could be saved, even if that man is a merciless tyrant? Raise your hand. *(He pauses long enough to give the audience time to raise their hand)* And now who among you says nothing and lets this doctor commit a murder by withholding treatment? Raise your hand. *(He pauses long enough to give the audience time to raise their hand)* But you're not priests, are you?

The stage lighting returns to the default setting, as if this aside never happened. The play picks up where it was left off.

Priest – I admit, I feel utterly powerless faced with such violence ...

Doctor – If you report me, you'll have my death on your conscience ... You've seen how the General treats his opponents. You'll find me hanged in my cell too ... Are you seriously considering reporting me?

Priest – Not if you stop me ...

Doctor – Stop you? How?

Doctor – By killing me too ...

Doctor – Is that what you want?

Priest – I will let you make your own decision.

Doctor – Only because it means you won't have to make a decision ... Who you do think you are, Father, offering yourself as a sacrifice? Jesus Christ? But your sacrifice would make no sense ... and wouldn't help anyone!

Priest – Jesus sacrificed himself to offer humanity a chance at reconciliation. That's actually the original meaning of the word "religion": to bind together those who believe. And it's also the meaning of the Eucharist ... a communion among all men ...

There's an uneasy moment. The doctor appears to have run out of arguments.

Doctor – In that case ... The die is cast, Father ... And it's time to get jab done...

Priest – I am ready.

The doctor prepares the syringe as the priest looks on.

Doctor – Don't worry, it won't hurt. Just a little pinch ...

Priest – I am at the mercy of your expert hands ... just like all your other patients.

The doctor injects the priest.

Doctor – Are you sure you don't want anything to drink?

Priest – Maybe a glass of water.

Doctor – I'll go get it ...

The doctor leaves the room. The priest notices the folder on the desk. He takes it but doesn't open it. The doctor returns with the glass of water.

Doctor – Oh ... Be careful there, Father, doctor-patient privilege ...

Priest – I wouldn't be able to make sense of those images anyway ...

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 last drink ...?

Doctor – You would really sacrifice yourself to avoid facing your responsibilities?

Priest – No, not to avoid facing my responsibilities. But to avoid betraying my convictions, maybe.

Doctor – It's also a good way to escape reality so you don't have to confront it. You would have made a great monk after all.

Priest – It would be a lot easier, for sure.

Doctor – And all that to save a man guilty of crimes against humanity.

Priest – He won't escape judgement, be it by God or men.

Doctor – But for now, he's judge, jury and executioner... and he claims to act in the name of God.

Priest – Believe me, I don't approve of this new Inquisition.

Doctor – And yet, you're not taking a stand against it ... After the regime falls you might be called to testify, do you realise that? Despite your sacred Oath of Confession ... You'll be accused of collaborating with the enemy.

Priest – Yes, I know ... And so will you ... You are the General's personal physician. And you aren't known for being a fierce opponent to the regime ... Sounds like you're trying to secure yourself a happy ever after by jumping off the sinking ship ... but not before letting the Captain drown.

Doctor – I wish ... I wouldn't even be able to pass for a rebel of the eleventh hour, unfortunately. I'll have hastened the demise of the tyrant, but in doing so I'll have broken my oath as a doctor and I can never let anyone know about it.

Priest – You could assassinate him in broad daylight. A single gun shot. You're an officer, you have a service weapon and you see him often enough for his scheduled physicals.

Doctor – I'll never be a hero, I'm afraid. I'll never be Brutus stabbing Caesar in full view of the entire Senate. I will never be that brave. Unlike you, I don't have a taste for sacrifice. I'm just a coward, as you know.

Priest – That's why this covert assassination is so appealing to you, isn't it?

Doctor – Crime without punishment ... But without posthumous glory either.

Priest – Without punishment ... I'm not so sure. You won't be executed by the dictatorship for killing the General, but you very well might be condemned by the liberators for having been on the wrong side for a while. Just like me ...

Doctor – See? There isn't a viable solution for me either. And you're right. I actually deserve it. You see, I actually supported this coup, originally. To bring an end to the chaos. I really believed in the benefits of order. But when it is imposed by the strongest on the weakest, order quickly turns into disorder.

Priest – Alas, order and disorder are both controlled by the law of the strongest.

Doctor – So what can we do?

Priest – Man's destiny is to wander without a map in a desert without roads, looking for an oasis that doesn't exist. That's why it's best to have Faith as a travelling companion ...

The doctor pulls the medical image from the file.

Doctor – Or Science ... Are you familiar with semiotics, Father?

Priest – The study of the meaning of signs. Just because we have Faith doesn't mean we can't be interested in science, Doctor. And conversely, many great scientists hold religious beliefs.

Doctor – In medicine, semiotics is the study of symptoms that allow doctors to establish a diagnostic and prescribe a treatment. Ultimately, doctors are the modern equivalent of the augurs in Ancient Rome, who claimed to foresee the future by looking for signs in the entrails of sacrificed animals.

Priest – Technically it was the haruspices who read the entrails of sacrificed animal. The augurs interpreted the flight of birds ...

Doctor – Nevertheless. You also share part of your job description with these ancient soothsayers, don't you?

Priest – Yes, I do. Back then you and I would have shared the same role. It's only relatively recently that the paths of science and religion have forked. For the better and sometimes for the worse ...

The doctor looks at the medical image he is holding.

Doctor – Interpreting signs ... After all, medicine still isn't an exact science ... I could have gotten it wrong ... Anyone would think it was a just a medical error ...

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

Doctor – I'll think of all those people I would have saved.

Priest – Like those augurs you mentioned, you think you can foresee the future and influence the course of History on your own?

Doctor – I can certainly try ...

Priest – How can you be sure the fall of the dictator won't lead to a blood bath? A civil war? Mass purges of dissidents? This dictatorship could just lead to another. Maybe even worse. Doesn't History teach us that repression can easily follow a revolution?

Doctor – So what then? Do nothing? Not even resist? Even when cowards like me could do so without taking any risks?

Priest – I don't know ...

Doctor – But yourself, don't you ever have a guilty conscience?

Priest – Sometimes ... but I also believe in the importance of the word given. In the importance of the pledge I made, that we both made. We both took an oath. And we have to keep it, no matter what. If we don't then everything falls apart. The law is sometimes unfair when it's applied to certain cases, but without laws there is no civilisation. Similarly, if we can't trust those who give their word, there is no Humanity ...

Doctor – Words can also be a weapon. A dictator is the one who dictates. Who dictates the law in his own terms. The law of the strongest.

Priest – What about the person who pronounces a death sentence, using his own criteria? Doesn't that make him a wannabe dictator?

Doctor – Laws are designed to be interpreted. There are moments in life where the death of a man is the best in a list of bad outcomes.

Priest – Today, perhaps. But once you start down that path, how do you ensure you don't end up losing your way? Isn't up to each of us to decide that the cycle of violence ends with us?

Doctor – So you too, like that man who became a priest, would have saved Hitler from drowning.

Priest – I would have saved a child. I wouldn't have condemned his future self. Or we would need to preventively lock up all the fundamentalists because they risk becoming terrorists. And lock up all the faithful because they might become fundamentalists. At this rate, those who govern us might as well round up all those who don't think exactly the way they do.

Doctor – But that's exactly what's happening with this theocracy-flavoured dictatorship!

Priest – Indeed. That's why those who will overthrow it need to be very careful not to replicate this deadly pattern.

Doctor – But you were saying just a while ago. If you know someone is planning a terrorist attack, shouldn't he be stopped?

Priest – But you can never be sure ...

Doctor – You can never be sure, I agree ... but sometimes offence is the best defence. You can't be sure you'll ever be infected by a virus, yet you agreed to be vaccinated.

Priest – You can't compare the worst of humanity with viruses that must be eliminated before they strike. That would mean stripping these men of any and all humanity. Evil lives in all of us. It is up to us to fight it inside ourselves before fighting it in others.

Doctor – I handle my own dark side. But that won't stay the hand of the murderer ready to strike.

Priest – They have models nowadays to predict who will become a criminal. And they're almost one hundred percent reliable, or so they tell us. Should we lock up everyone identified by those models, as a preventative measure?

Doctor – Well, we lock up raving lunatics.

Priest – Because they have lost the ability to control their free will ...

Doctor – And we also perform abortions because a test showed that a child will be born with Down Syndrome.

Priest – Which poses the questions of eugenics ... Should we eliminate all the carriers of a certain disease before birth? So they don't become a burden, to themselves and society at large?

Doctor – Eugenics is not about criminal behaviour.

Priest – They say there might be a crime-chromosome ... Modern science bizarrely echoes 19th century phrenology, where congenital flaws were allegedly diagnosed using the shape of people's skulls ... We're not far from the pseudo-scientific fantasies of the Nazis, which lead to mass exterminations, all in the pursuit of creating a superior race. Isn't the degree of enlightenment of a civilisation best measured by how it treats its weakest elements?

Doctor – Let's focus on the way to treat this regime's most powerful man. Do you really think the General can still come to his senses? And how sincere would his remorse be when his regime's opponents are already growling at the doors of the Presidential Palace ...

Priest – That will be for our judicial courts to decide. As they set out determine the extent of his responsibility. How much freedom do we have against determinism? That is the question ... If our fate is sealed from birth, we are no longer men but programmed machines. I cannot accept to live in such a world ... If you believe some of us are programmed to do evil like others are programmed to do good, there is no more freedom, no more responsibility and therefore no possibility of redemption. All we'd need is to sort the wheat from the chaff, using scientific methods, until we permanently eradicate all the weeds. Wouldn't that make us a totalitarian society?

Doctor – I believe in freedom. But not without limits ... We may have varying degrees of freedom in how we react to situations, but the situations are often imposed upon us. Take the case of a large family, for example. All the children are placed in the same context, but they build their unique identities by reacting differently based on who they are and the choices they make.

Priest – Yes ... When you have been the victim of physical abuse you can become an abuser ... or not. There is a choice there, certainly. We are not just the product of our environment. But I want to believe in what today we call resilience.

Doctor – Indeed. We shape ourselves in response to the circumstances that we are confronted to, based on what we are. But do we really have a choice in what we are?

Priest – Do you think the General was predetermined to become a dictator? That he didn't have a choice? Are you suggesting that we should have eliminated him at birth? That, like young Hitler, we should have drowned him?

Doctor – I don't know ... I feel like this philosophical debate is pointless ... There are people actually fighting to change the course of History right under our windows.

A beat during which we hear protest sounds from the street and bursts of machine-gun fire.

Priest – As things stand, unfortunately, as doctor and priest, we can only sit and wait, powerless, until we learn what comes out of this confrontation. Speaking of which ... what made you want to become a doctor?

Doctor – My father was a surgeon. One of my brothers is a cardiologist and the other one a dentist. It was in my genes, you could say. What about you? I imagine your father wasn't a monk.

Priest – He was a butcher ... He was an atheist and didn't approve of my decision to join the priesthood.

Doctor – He must have been disappointed that there was no one to take over the family business ...

Priest – A priest for a son ... I think he would have preferred if I was gay ...

Doctor – Are you an only child?

Priest – I have four sisters. None of them are nuns, far from it ...

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

Priest – Do you have children, Captain?

Doctor – I have a son.

Priest – If your son was a criminal and came to see you mortally wounded, would you let him die?

Doctor – Probably not.

Priest – When I became priest, I decided, like Jesus our Lord and Saviour, to consider all men like my own children. You'll understand that I cannot let a single one of them die if I can help it, even if he's the worst of them.

Doctor – My son is more courageous than I am. At this very moment he's fighting in the street. He could be killed at any moment. It's also to save him that I want this regime to end as soon as possible, and therefore get rid of this tyrant.

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

Doctor – I feel it is more than likely, unfortunately.

A beat. More fighting sounds from outside.

Priest – In a way, I feel sorry for you ... What a sad life it must be to live in a world where everyone's fate is predetermined.

Doctor – Even if for criminals, determinism is the perfect excuse for shirking their responsibilities. Stop me if you've heard this one. A man sees a snake stuck under a rock. The snake pleads to be freed, promising the man he won't bite him. The man lifts the rock and the snake bites him. As the man is dying, the snake apologises, explaining to the man that it is in his nature to bite.

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

Doctor – To the point where you'd report me, sending me to certain death?

Priest – If you leave me no choice.

Doctor – You won't do it.

Priest – Why...? Because instead of a vaccine you injected me with a poison, like this snake you were talking about?

Doctor – You think that's what I did?

Priest – You could have let the General die without sharing it in your confession ... You had already made up your mind, hadn't you? Why else would you confess if the crime hadn't already been in motion?

Doctor – Maybe because I needed a bit of encouragement ... I told you, I'm a coward. I needed your blessing.

Priest – If you’ve really injected me with poison, know that I forgive you ... And you’d save me from having to make a difficult choice too ...

Doctor – That’s what you wanted, isn’t it?

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

Doctor – It might be the first time in history that a priest is murdered during a confession, and provides absolution to his killer before getting to the part about the penance.

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

A beat.

Doctor – Would I throw a rope to a tyrant that’s drowning ...? To hang him, maybe.

The phone rings. The doctor answers.

Doctor – Yes, Sergeant ... Yes ... When? That’s awful, indeed ... I understand ... Agreed ... (*He hangs up*) The General just died of a heart attack ...

Priest – Dear God in Heaven ...

Doctor – You know very well God doesn’t have a whole lot to do with this ...

Priest – But now that your sin has come to pass, I can give you absolution ...

Doctor – Really?

Priest – If you genuinely repent.

Doctor – Well, I’m not proud of it.

Priest – I can work with that ... May God the Father of mercies, who through the death and resurrection of his only Son has reconciled the world to himself, give you forgiveness and peace. I absolve you from your sins in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Doctor – Would you also give me absolution for your murder?

Priest – I have already forgiven you. But to receive absolution, the crime must actually be committed so I would have to be dead. And that would make me unqualified to give you absolution ... You’ll have to find another priest to confess to.

Doctor – I see ...

Priest – But you haven’t actually poisoned me, have you?

Doctor – What about you? Would you really have reported me?

Priest – Who knows ...

Doctor – Well, you won’t die of a virus any time soon... The vaccine will protect you for several years.

The priest stands up to leave. The phone rings. The doctor picks up.

Doctor – Yes Sergeant ... Thank you for letting me know ... (*He hangs up*) The protesters have broken through the gates, they are storming the palace. We will soon have to answer for our actions ...

Priest – May God have mercy on us ...

The doctor takes a gun from a drawer and places it on the desk.

Doctor – God helps those who help themselves ...

Priest – Who are you planning on using this weapon on, Captain? Your former companions or your recently discovered allies, who most likely don't consider you one of them?

Doctor – We'll see, Father. For now, let's save our skins. We can't stay here ...

They rise and make to leave.

Black.

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 websites :

<https://comediatheque.net/>

<https://jeanpierremartinez.net/en/accueil-english/>

However, an authorisation is required from the author for any public representation.

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

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
The Costa Mucho Castaways
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
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
The Way 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
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
Strip Poker
Surviving Mankind
The Deal
The Fishbowl
The Perfect Son-in-Law
The Pyramids
The Smell of Money
The Tourists

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
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
The House of Our Dreams
The Jackpot
The Performance is not
cancelled
The Worst Village in England
Welcome aboard!
White Coats, Dark Humour

Collection of sketches

Backstage Bits
Don't panic
Enough is Enough
Ethan and Eve
For real and for fun
Him and Her
Killer Sketches
Lost time Chronicles
Open Hearts
Sidewalk Chronicles
Stage Briefs
Stories to die for

Monologues

Happy Dogs
Like a fish in the air

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Avignon – July 2025
© La Comédiathèque – ISBN 978-2-38602-181-7
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