

La Comédiathèque

# Is there an author in the audience?

Jean-Pierre Martinez

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# **Is there an author in the audience?**

**Jean-Pierre Martinez**

*Translation by the author*

It's been seven years since a health crisis caused the closure of all theatres. Three individuals, presumed to be actors, step on a stage for an audition. Unless it's a public reading. Or it might even be the show's opening ... The problem is that they don't have the script. The author hasn't written it yet. They're going to have to improvise...

## **Characters**

Fred: actress (or actor)

Max: actor (or actress)

Sam: actress (or actor)

Jacky: author

*The four characters can be played by either male or female actors.  
In this version, Max and Jacky will be men, while Fred and Sam will be women.*

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*The stage is empty. In the audience, a seat in the front row is reserved, with a piece of paper marked "critic". Jacky, the presumed critic, arrives last, walking with crutches, looking rather unwell and appearing older than he actually is. He may be wearing a fake beard and glasses. He takes his seat. Fred arrives on stage from backstage. She glances around hesitantly.*

**Fred** – Well... They didn't bother with the set... Another low-budget production. As long as they can afford to pay the actors... They could have at least offered us a coffee... *(She notices the audience.)* Oh, sorry... I didn't realize it was a public performance... Sorry, I... I was only informed last night, and... *(A bit embarrassed)* Apparently, I'm the first one here... Besides you, of course... *(Pause)* Have you been waiting long? Don't worry, the others should be arriving soon... I hope so... *(She continues pacing the stage, trying to contain herself.)* But you can carry on chatting among yourselves in the meantime... The show hasn't really started yet... Don't mind me... And me... I'm going to pretend you're not here. I mean... as if the play had already begun. It's called the fourth wall, did you know that? The side where the audience sits. So, we act as if... there's nobody in the room. We know there are people watching us, since they've paid for it, but... Well, I guess you didn't pay... *(Max arrives as well, but Fred doesn't notice him right away and keeps soliloquizing. Max is slightly surprised.)* It's a convention, you see. The actor knows there are people sitting there in front of the stage, but the character acts as if it were a wall and avoids looking at the audience... and speaking to them, obviously. So as not to break the magic of theatre. The illusion that on stage, it's not just actors reciting lines, but real characters experiencing truly fascinating things. It's like in the movies, if you prefer. The actor isn't supposed to look at the camera... In theatre, it's very important to respect conventions. We mustn't play with them, otherwise... *(A bit lost)* Everything collapses...

**Max** – Hello...

*Fred startles slightly.*

**Fred** – Excuse me... I didn't hear you come in.

**Max** – No, no, it's me... Sorry to interrupt... You were rehearsing your lines, I assume.

**Fred** – My lines?

**Max** – The lines from the play.

**Fred** – Oh, no, I...

**Max** – But this is the right place, isn't it?

**Fred** – Yes, yes, it's here... I suppose, but... for now, there's nobody here. Apart from you and me, of course. And the audience...

*Max spots the audience.*

**Max** – I see... So it's an audition... in front of an audience.

**Fred** – Oh, because it's an audition?

**Max** – Isn't that what you were told?

**Fred** – Yes, yes... Well, I was told it was more like a reading, but well... it's the same thing, isn't it?

**Max** – Yes, I suppose... (*Pause*) However... I haven't been given the script, have you?

**Fred** – No, me neither.

**Max** – Ah, really? Because earlier, I heard you... reciting a monologue.

**Fred** – Oh, no, but I... I wasn't reciting.

**Max** – Really?

**Fred** – No, I was... I was improvising.

**Max** – Improvising?

**Fred** – Well, no... I was talking, that's all. Like we do in real life.

**Max** – You were talking to yourself, then. You were... soliloquising, as they say.

**Fred** – But not at all! I was talking... to the audience.

**Max** – Of course.

*Pause.*

**Fred** – So, in your opinion, when I speak, does it sound like I'm reciting?

**Max** – I don't know...

**Fred** – I wonder what it must be like when I'm reciting... Well, I mean... when I say a line, like in the theatre...

**Max** – Yes...

*Pause.*

**Fred** – By the way, I would have preferred to be able to read the text beforehand, wouldn't you?

**Max** – Yes... me too.

**Fred** – Well... we are professionals, aren't we?

**Max** – That's for sure...

*Pause.*

**Fred** – And... how many of us will there be?

**Max** – Sorry?

**Fred** – In the play! How many characters are there?

**Max** – At least two, anyway.

**Fred** – Yes, of course... You and me...

*Pause.*

**Max** – Three, I think.

**Fred** – That's what I understood too, yes. Three characters...

**Max** – So we're just waiting for... the third man.

**Fred** – Or the third woman.

**Max** – Yes... No, it was just a reference to the movie.

**Fred** – Is it for a film? I thought it was for a play...

**Max** – The film... The Third Man...

**Fred** – Ah, yes... The... The film. Excuse me, I'm not fully awake...

**Max** – I could do with a coffee myself.

*Awkward silence.*

**Fred** – We have a meeting with the director, I suppose.

**Max** – I imagine the playwright will be there too.

**Fred** – Surely... at least for the first reading of his play.

**Max** – Probably the producer as well. And they will decide together. For the casting, I mean...

*Pause.*

**Fred** – Do you think there are other candidates? If it's a casting...

**Max** – I don't know...

**Fred** – It seemed to me that today it was more of a reading.

**Max** – Or maybe... they have already decided it's going to be us.

**Fred** – They were probably impressed by our professional experience...

**Max** – Or maybe they couldn't find any other candidates...

*Sam enters.*

**Sam** – Hi! I'm here for the reading.

**Fred** – Ah, you see, it's indeed a reading!

**Sam** – I'm not too late, I hope...

**Max** – No, no, don't worry. In fact, we haven't seen anyone yet.

**Sam** – OK... (*She looks around and notices the audience, she's a bit surprised but remains very comfortable.*) Hello everyone... How's it going? (*Turning back to her two partners*) So, we're going to play together...

**Max** – It seems so.

**Sam** – Great.

*Pause.*

**Fred** – I suppose they didn't give you the script either.

**Sam** – The script? Um... no.

**Fred** – Maybe they think that way... we'll be more spontaneous.

**Sam** – Spontaneous?

**Fred** – If we don't know the text in advance.

**Max** – Yes, maybe...

**Sam** – Well, at least it saved us from having to learn it. That's something...

**Max** – Well, if we get cast, we'll have to learn it one day.

**Fred** – Yes...

**Max** – The script... The script of the play...

*Pause.*

**Sam** – By the way, have you heard about this new app for learning your lines?

**Max** – Imparato?

**Fred** – What's that?

**Sam** – You load the script of the play you have to learn onto the app, and it's a synthetic voice that gives you the lines.

**Fred** – A synthetic voice?

**Max** – An artificial voice...

**Fred** – Really? No, I didn't know that...

**Sam** – Yes, it's super convenient...

**Max** – Provided you have a script to load onto the application, of course.

**Fred** – You'll see that one day the actors on stage will be replaced by robots with synthetic voices.

**Fred** – No more actors, no more audience... Only disembodied characters performing in front of surveillance cameras.

**Max** – Like a cartoon on TV.

**Fred** – Yes... But even cartoon characters have a script. As for us, for now...

*Pause.*

**Sam** – I wonder what they're up to...

**Max** – They'll turn up sooner or later.

**Fred** – I hope so...

*Pause.*

**Sam** – Anyway, it's great to be back on stage, isn't it?

**Fred** – We've been waiting for this for so long... We had almost lost hope.

**Max** – All theatres closed for seven years... and now, the curtain rises and the lights come back on.

**Fred** – It's as if the sun was finally rising after an endless night. We are at the dawn of a new day. Perhaps a new era...

*The other two are slightly surprised by this lyrical outburst.*

**Sam** – Yes... By the way, it smells a bit musty in here, doesn't it?

**Max** – Not to mention the dust. They could have swept it up and aired the place a bit.

**Sam** – Before we find corpses in the dressing rooms and a skeleton in the prompter hole...

*Brief moment of general concern.*

**Fred** – Do prompters still exist?

**Sam** – What could they possibly have to say? We don't have a script.

*Pause.*

**Max** – Seven years...

**Fred** – All of this will leave its mark, but well...

**Max** – Many won't recover from it, that's clear.

**Fred** – Hundreds of theatres bankrupt, thousands of unemployed actors, tens of thousands of theatre workers forced to change jobs.

**Sam** – And of course, they don't know how to do anything else.

**Max** – Apparently, this theatre is the only one considering reopening its doors. All the others have been replaced by essential businesses: hardware stores, luxury groceries, pet shops...

**Sam** – But here we are! Still standing. I can't wait to get started, can you?

**Max** – Absolutely.

*Pause.*

**Fred** – Do you know the title?

**Sam** – The title?

**Fred** – The title of the play! We don't have the script, but do we at least know the title?

**Max** – No...

**Fred** – That would have given us an idea of what the play's about...

**Max** – That's true. We have absolutely no idea what we're going to perform.

**Sam** – Personally, I honestly don't care. As long as I get to perform...

**Max** – It's been so long... We would be ready to play anything. From the great classics to... the worst farce.

**Fred** – Yes... As long as we're given a script... (*Silence*) Because I have to admit that... I'm starting to run out of things to say.

**Sam** – Me too.

**Max** – We can't keep spouting banalities like this for much longer. (*Lowering his voice, discreetly pointing at the audience*) They'll start getting impatient...

**Sam** – How long has it been going on already?

**Fred** – Oh, because it has already started?

**Sam** – No, I mean... how long have we been here?

**Max** – I don't know. I would say... about fifteen minutes, maybe?

**Sam** – At least that's something, but still...

*Pause.*

**Max** – And when you arrived, did you see anyone or...

**Sam** – I just saw the cashier at the entrance...

**Fred** – The cashier...

**Sam** – At first, she wouldn't even let me in... I thought I was going to have to buy a ticket just to get here.

**Fred** – Same for me. I guess we don't have the look of actors...

**Sam** – Not famous actors, anyway...

**Max** – You'll see that soon you'll have to pay to be allowed to play in the theatre.



**Fred** – Or we'll do without actors and ask the audience to perform the play themselves.

**Sam** – Or even write it live, instead of the author...

*A moment of silence.*

**Max** – So, I wasn't dreaming... they do sell tickets at the entrance.

*Embarrassed silence.*

**Sam** – Yeah... It's true that for a casting...

**Fred** – Or even for a simple reading...

*A moment.*

**Max** – I'll go and see...

**Sam** – Go and see what?

**Max** – The cashier at the entrance! I'll ask what's going on. We can't just stand here all day waiting like idiots. I have other things to do, don't you?

**Fred** – Yes, yes... Of course... We have other things to do...

**Sam** – Okay. Do you want me to come with you?

**Fred** – You're not going to leave me alone here! (*Pointing to the audience*) With them...

**Sam** – It's true... especially if they've paid.

**Max** – I'm going...

*Max exits. The two others exchange a worried look. Sam addresses the audience.*

**Fred** – Excuse us... It shouldn't be long before the shows starts...

**Sam** – As soon as we get the script.

**Fred** – Sorry to waste your time with this... completely dispensable show.

**Sam** – Not to say irrelevant...

**Fred** – We're just like you, we have no choice... We're waiting...

*A moment.*

**Sam** – Do you have other things to do?

**Fred** – Sorry?

**Sam** – He said... I have other things to do, and you answered, me too. Do you really have better things to do than to be here?

**Fred** – Ah...? Uh... No... I've got nothing else to do. (*A moment*) Have you?

**Sam** – No...

**Fred** – I imagine he doesn't either. He just said it like that...

*A moment.*

**Sam** – I don't think we've met before. Do we?

**Fred** – No... Why? Should we...

**Sam** – I don't know... We're in the same profession. We could know each other. We might have crossed paths somewhere, at least. Or even... have acted together in another play.

**Fred** – No, I don't think so.

**Sam** – We would remember.

**Fred** – At the same time... seven years wearing masks. Nobody recognizes anyone anymore.

**Sam** – We've forgotten what the other's face looks like.

**Fred** – Even myself, in the morning, I barely recognize myself in the mirror.

*Silence.*

**Sam** – It's been so long since we've been able to do this job.

**Fred** – That's true. I even admit that...

**Sam** – Yes?

**Fred** – Sometimes, I wonder if I still know how.

**Sam** – Acting... it's like making love, you never forget.

**Fred** – Making love?

**Sam** – Or riding a bike, if you prefer...

**Fred** – I don't know...

**Sam** – What...?

**Fred** – I don't know if you can forget or not... I've never ridden a bike.

**Sam** (*surprised*) – You don't know how to ride a bike?

**Fred** – No... and you?

*A moment.*

**Sam** – Me neither.

**Fred** – Well, I don't think you have to know how to ride a bike to be in this play...

**Sam** – No, probably not...

**Fred** – They would have mentioned it, right? It's very rare to find a play where you ride a bike on stage.

**Sam** – And plays where you make love on stage, even less.

**Fred** – In any case, I've never seen any...

*A moment.*

**Sam** – But do you know how to swim?

**Fred** – Do you think we should know how to swim?

**Sam** – No, no, I just said it randomly.

**Fred** – Why should we know how to swim?

**Sam** – I don't know... So that we don't drown...

**Fred** – Do you know how to swim?

*Sam prefers not to answer.*

**Sam** – And the playwright, do you know who he is?

**Fred** – Which playwright?

**Sam** – The playwright of the play we're performing...

*She looks at him with concern. Max returns.*

**Fred** – So?

**Max** – Well, we're in trouble...

**Sam** – What's going on?

**Max** – You'd better sit down.

**Sam** – We would like to, but we haven't got any chairs.

**Fred** – Did you see the cashier?

**Sam** – What did she tell you?

**Max** – Nothing...

**Fred** – Nothing?

**Max** – The cashier left... with the cash, actually.

**Sam** – She left? Without telling us anything?

*Max holds up a paper.*

**Max** – She left us this.

**Sam** – The script for the play?

**Fred** – Just one page?

**Max** – It's not the script for the play. It's a message. A message to us. I've just read it...

**Sam** – We're listening...

**Max** – It's a show that was supposed to have its premiere seven years ago.

**Fred** – Just before all the theatres closed, putting all the actors out of work...

**Sam** – And forcing all the cultural performers to switch to agriculture...

**Fred** – And then?

**Max** – Since then, the producer of the play went bankrupt, like so many others.

**Sam** – Oh, damn...

**Fred** – But are they going to give us the script for the play? For the reading...

**Max** – That's where it gets a bit complicated.

**Sam** – Complicated? For whom?

**Max** – Seven years ago, since the theatre closures were already scheduled, the playwright didn't rush to write the play...

**Fred** – Well, but now, has he finished writing it?

**Sam** – In seven years, even without rushing, he's had plenty of time, right?

**Max** – You know how playwrights are... In general, they're not very hard workers. So when the pressure's off...

**Fred** – Still... what a lack of professionalism.

**Max** – It wasn't easy for him either, during all that time... No more shows, no more royalties...

**Sam** – And then?

**Max** – He ended up having a breakdown.

**Fred** – So, he won't come?

**Max** – At this point, he would still be in a rehab facility, we don't really know where.

**Sam** – A rehab facility... Writing this play didn't tire him out much, that's for sure...

**Fred** – But come on, it's insane! Why did they call actors for a casting?

**Sam** – And above all... why did they choose us?

**Max** – Time passed... The three actors originally planned were no longer available.

**Fred** – You mean... they had other commitments?

**Max** – If you want to put it that way... One has joined the army, the second is in prison, and the third apparently committed suicide.

**Fred** – Okay, so there's been a last-minute change of cast. Nothing too extraordinary so far...

**Fred** – The question is... why did they ask us to come if they have nothing for us to perform?

**Sam** – Or even to read?

**Max** (*very serious*) – This is where you're going to laugh.

**Fred** – I fear the worst.

**Max** – We're not here to read a play...

**Sam** – Then why are we here?

**Max** – We're here for the premiere!

*Surprise on the faces of the other two.*

**Fred** – The premiere?

**Sam** – Is this a joke?

**Fred** – But why did they keep the premiere date if the play isn't even written yet?

**Max** – Until the last moment, the producer hoped that the playwright would give him the script on time. So they sold the tickets...

**Fred** – But that's madness!

**Sam** – That's an understatement if the playwright is locked up in a mental asylum.

**Max** – When they realized the playwright would never write the play, it was too late.

**Sam** – They should have just canceled it! And refunded the tickets!

**Max** – Apparently, the producer preferred pocketing the box office money...

**Fred** – But he's still going to come?

**Max** – It's unlikely... He fled to Switzerland to escape his creditors...

*Silence.*

**Sam** – Now, what do we do?

**Max** – Well... we'll have to improvise...

**Fred** – Improvise? We were called here for the reading of a play that isn't even written yet. We've been told it's the premiere, and we're supposed to improvise?

**Sam** – We should just leave!

**Max** – Even that... I'm afraid it won't be very easy.

**Fred** – And why is that?

**Max** – The cashier left, locking the doors behind her. We're all trapped in this theatre until the end of the performance.

**Fred** – What do you mean, the performance? What performance?

**Max** – All these people paid for their tickets. And the cashier ran off with the box office. If we don't find something to play for them, we're going to be lynched...

*They cast an anxious look toward the audience.*

**Fred** – I feel like they're already looking at us with strange eyes...

*General worry.*

**Sam** – Something to perform? But what? We don't even have the script!

**Max** – Then we'll just have to make it up...

*A moment.*

**Sam** – Playwriting is a profession... What could we possibly come up with?

**Max** – I don't know.

**Fred** – So, we're going to improvise then?

**Sam** – Improv is a profession too! Have you ever done it?

**Max** – No...

**Fred** – But in life, that's what we do, right? We improvise.

**Max** – Yes, but it's not necessarily exciting. People don't buy a theatre ticket to listen three strangers talking about the weather.

**Sam** – We need to find something to perform, and quickly... *(To Fred)* Do you have any ideas?

*Silence. Fred looks absent-minded. The other two exchange an awkward glance before turning back to her, waiting for her to answer. As a last resort, Sam reluctantly repeats the question.*

**Sam** – Do you have any ideas?

*Silence.*

**Fred** – I'm really sorry, I have a blank...

**Sam** – A blank?

**Fred** – A memory lapse! It happens to the best of us, right?

**Max** – How could you have a memory lapse... when we don't have a script?

**Fred** – Oh yes, right, you're right...

**Max** – Of course.

**Fred** – So, can I say anything, then?

**Sam** – That's pretty much what you've been doing from the beginning, isn't it?

**Fred** – Can I really say whatever comes to mind?

*The other two seem a bit worried. Max turns towards the audience.*

**Max** – Look at them... I'm sure they're wondering if all of this is already written...

**Fred** – If I really have a memory lapse...

**Max** – If we're improvising...

**Sam** – Or if we're really in deep shit...

*A moment.*

**Max** – Well, let's start by introducing ourselves...

**Fred** – What's the point?

**Max** – To see if there's anything in our lives that we could use as the basis for a play.

**Sam** – I see... Something that creates a starting point.

**Max** – Comedy or tragedy, it doesn't matter.

**Sam** – Alright...

**Fred** – Who starts?

*They look at each other with a suspicious look.*

**Max** – It feels a bit like an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting, I know...

**Sam** – Let's call it Actors Anonymous instead, considering how famous we are in this profession...

*Max turns to Fred.*

**Max** – Would you like to start?

**Fred** – Okay... My name is Fred.

**Max** – Max.

**Sam** – Sam.

*Silence.*

**Max** – And apart from that...?

**Fred** – I don't know... What do you want to know?

**Max** – If you don't want to talk about yourselves, tell us about your job.

**Fred** – My job?

**Max** – Your job as an actress...

*Another silence.*

**Sam** – Speaking about job, ...

**Fred** – What?

**Sam** – I've got a little confession to make.

**Max** – We're listening...

**Sam** – Actually... I'm not really an actress.

**Fred** – Oh no...?

**Sam** – Let's just say... I've added a bit more to my CV. And since no one wants to be a comedian these days... Apparently, they weren't very particular about the candidates.

**Max** – I see...

**Sam** – And what about you?

**Max** – The same goes for me.

*Sam turns to Fred.*

**Fred** – As far as I'm concerned, I admit that... I did a bit more than add to it.

**Max** – What do you mean?

**Fred** – I've never done any theatre in my life. Have you?

**Sam** – It's my first time on stage.

**Max** – Me too.

*A moment of silence.*

**Max** – So, to sum up, nobody here is an actor, and we don't have any lines to perform...

**Sam** – Soon we're going to find out that the people in the audience aren't spectators either...

**Fred** – If they're not spectators... who could they be?

**Max** – I don't know... No one has been to the theatre for seven years...

**Sam** – People didn't go there much even before...



**Max** – There might be one or two real spectators who recognize themselves, and the others are extras...

**Sam** – Or even inflatable dolls, like on TV sets.

*Silence.*

**Sam** – That's going a bit too far, isn't it?

**Fred** – Yes, it's even starting to get a bit creepy.

**Max** – Alright, let's focus on our lives instead. If you're not more of an actor than I am, you've got a real job. What do you do for a living?

*Embarrassed silence.*

**Sam** – I wasn't doing much before... so with this health crisis.

**Fred** – I've always struggled to find employment. Even in the theatre... What about you?

**Max** – Me neither, I wasn't doing anything very interesting.

**Fred** – Are you married?

**Sam** – No.

**Fred** – Any children?

**Max** – None either.

**Fred** – Any family? Friends?

*Silence.*

**Sam** – What kind of play could we come up with, with three people who do nothing for a living, have no social relationships, and no sex life?

**Max** – Maybe if we have a drink, it might give us some inspiration?

**Fred** – Yes, I've heard that most writers are alcoholics.

**Sam** – Unfortunately, that doesn't make all alcoholics writers.

**Max** – I think I saw some bottles backstage.

*He fetches a bottle of wine, a bottle of whiskey, and some glasses.*

**Sam** – I'll have the wine, please. Thanks.

**Fred** – Whiskey, I need it.

*Max pours for them and also serves himself some red wine. They drink.*

**Sam** – This Bordeaux has a strange taste.

**Max** – It's strawberry syrup. And the whiskey?

**Fred** – It's apple juice.

**Sam** – We're in the theatre... Everything is fake...

**Max** – Yes... starting with us...

**Fred** – Fake?

**Sam** – We're not really actors...

**Max** – Nobody knows us.

**Fred** – We don't know anyone.

**Sam** – So who are we?

**Max** – Three characters in search of an author?

**Fred** – In Pirandello's play, there are six of them.

**Sam** – I guess ours is a low-budget production.

**Max** – It's more like a bankrupt production.

**Fred** – That doesn't tell us what we might be playing...

*Sam takes another sip and grimaces.*

**Sam** – I don't know any writer who have found inspiration in strawberry syrup...

*A moment.*

**Fred** – Well, our situation is quite funny...

**Max** – What situation?

**Fred** – Actors who aren't really actors...

**Sam** – Who have to improvise a play on the day of the premiere because they have no script.

**Fred** – That's pretty unusual, isn't it?

**Max** – Yeah...

**Sam** – So are we already performing this play without knowing it?

**Fred** – Why not?

**Max** – The question is what happens next.

**Fred** – Yes, that's the problem...

*A moment.*

**Sam** – What if we asked them?

**Max** – Who?

**Sam** – The audience!

**Fred** – There might be someone in the audience who has already seen the play and could tell us how it ends...

**Max** – How could they have already seen the play if it's the premiere?

**Fred** – Oh yes, that's true...

**Max** – And especially if the play isn't written yet.

*A moment.*

**Fred** – But wasn't yesterday the premiere?

**Max** – Maybe... but it wasn't the same audience...

**Sam** – That's true... no one would be crazy enough to see this show twice.

**Fred** – Just to make sure that in this total improvisation, we say exactly the same thing each time.

*Silence.*

**Sam** – Well, I don't know... If this show is a complete disaster, they might have a better idea.

**Fred** – An idea for what?

**Sam** – An idea for a play!

*A moment.*

**Fred** – Ask the audience if they have a better idea than the pitiful show we're giving them? Do you really think we can do that?

**Max** – We're not even supposed to talk to them during the performance.

**Fred** – We're supposed to act as if they're not there. It's called the fourth wall...

**Sam** – Are you going to keep harping on about your fourth wall? We don't care about any of that, do we?

**Fred** – Well, yes, but... if we don't even respect the theatres codes.

**Sam** – Live performance died seven years ago! And we... we're the living dead, that's what we are! You still don't get it, do you?

**Fred** – It's all right, there's no need to get upset either... Let's keep things civil...

**Sam** – Excuse me, I think we're all a bit on edge...

**Max** – It's true that we're facing a completely unprecedented situation.

**Sam** – And with an unprecedented situation comes unprecedented solutions...

**Max** – After all, you never know, there might be an author in the audience...

**Fred** – We can always ask...

**Sam** – Is there an author in the audience?

*They scan the audience with their gaze. In case a spectator would respond, whether they are an author or not, the actors will pretend to examine them with a skeptical look, and the next line will remain unchanged.*

**Sam** – At the very least... we would need to find someone who seems to have a bit of imagination...

**Fred** – It's not easy...

**Max** (*pointing to a spectator*) – Why not him...? Sir? Oh, sorry for waking you up...

**Fred** (*pointing to another spectator*) – Or her...?

**Max** – At least she's not asleep, but... she doesn't seem very awake either.

*Sam addresses a third spectator, who is part of the cast: the presumed critic.*

**Sam** – Sir?

**Jacky** – Me?

**Sam** – Yes, you. Do you have an idea?

**Jacky** – An idea? No...

**Sam** – Come, please.

**Jacky** – Oh, no, really... I assure you, I have no imagination.

**Max** – You're not going to let us down, are you?

**Fred** – Come with us, don't be shy.

**Sam** – Don't worry, we're not actors either.

**Jacky** – Well...

*Jacky stands up with his crutches. Obviously, he struggles to get on stage. Sam helps him a bit, and Jacky manages to climb onto the stage with difficulty.*

**Max** – Thank you for agreeing so enthusiastically to take part in writing this live play that we are performing in front of you. You're saving our lives...

*The three actors look at Jacky with a mixture of hope and skepticism. They wait for him to say something for a moment, but in vain. He seems quite unwell.*

**Sam** – Yes, I think we've hit the jackpot...

**Fred** – We'd better have him sit down, right? He can barely stand on his legs...

**Sam** – But we still don't have any chairs.

**Fred** – Would you like to sit down, sir?

*Jacky looks around a bit anxiously.*

**Jacky** – Pardon?

**Fred** – And on top of that, he's deaf as a post... Would you like to sit down?

**Sam** – You're the one who's deaf, I'm telling you we don't have any chairs!

**Jacky** – Sit down? Ah... no, thank you. I'm not going to stay anyway.

**Max** – I beg you, don't let us down. I believe you understand the seriousness of the situation.

**Jacky** – Yes...

**Fred** – And could you help us?

**Jacky** – I would like to, but... how?

**Sam** – To begin with... What kind of plays do you like to see at the theatre?

**Jacky** – A funny play, preferably.

**Max** – Alright... So a comedy. And what makes you laugh in general?

**Jacky** – I don't know... If I knew in advance what was going to make me laugh, it wouldn't make me laugh at all, would it?

**Sam** – Damn, it seems we've stumbled upon an intellectual...

**Max** – If you were to write a comedy, what would it be about?

**Jacky** – About what?

**Fred** – About whom, then? Your mother-in-law, for example?

**Jacky** – My mother-in-law? Why would I write about about my mother-in-law?

**Fred** – The mother-in-law is a recurring character in boulevard comedy. I guess a mother-in-law always makes you laugh. In the theatre, anyway...

**Jacky** – Mine got run over by an ambulance. Do you think anyone would find that funny... besides me?

**Sam** – It all depends on how it's told...

**Max** – Looks like more than just his legs don't work. He seems to be missing a few marbles upstairs...

**Jacky** – Listen, when I go to the theatre, it's to be entertained... And now you're asking me to write the play for you.

**Sam** – Why not?

**Jacky** – It's not up to the audience to write the play they come to see! And why not perform it as well?

**Fred** – Admit it, it's never been done before!

**Jacky** – If it's avant-garde theatre, then maybe...

**Max** – You're right... After seven years of closure... it would be more like rear-guard theatre.

**Jacky** – Can I sit back down now?

*A moment of silence.*

**Sam** – And now everyone's wondering if this idiot is a real spectator... or if he's part of the actors.

**Max** – If he's improvising or reciting his lines.

**Fred** – But after all, in life, do you ever really know if you're improvising, or if everything you say is written in advance...

**Jacky** – Oh dear... Let's not get too philosophical here either. (*Pointing at the audience*) Look, you're losing them...

**Max** – Alright, let's get back to something lighter then. By the way, tell me my dear, what happened to you? A bad fall?

**Jacky** – I fell down and twisted my ankle.

**Fred** – Do you really think we'll make them laugh with a bad fall?

**Sam** – Maybe not a bad fall. But a good twist in a story always brings laughter, right?

**Jacky** – I tried to commit suicide by jumping out of the window at the hospital.

**Max** – Oh, yeah, I'm not sure... It's always difficult to make people laugh about suicide.

**Jacky** – Since we were only on the first floor and I bounced off the roof of the ambulance, I only sprained my ankle.

**Sam** – Well, that's quite funny, isn't it?

**Jacky** – You think so?

**Max** – And what were you hospitalized for exactly?

**Jacky** – I wasn't hospitalized! I came to visit my mother-in-law.

**Fred** – I thought she was dead...

**Jacky** – I said she got run over by an ambulance, I didn't say she was dead! It seems you're not very sharp, I must say. No wonder you can't come up with an idea for your play...

**Sam** – He's starting to get on my nerves, what about you?

**Max** – And... why did you want to end your life? If it's not too indiscreet?

**Jacky** – It's a long story.

**Fred** – Just the thing, we're looking for a story!

**Jacky** – Well, you see, my mother-in-law had just told me...

*A crackling sound is heard, followed by a recorded voice. It's Jacky's voice, but hardly recognizable.*

**Voice-over** – Good evening, everyone. I'm Jacky Ramirez, the author of this play that I didn't have the courage to write. If you're hearing this message, it's because you made it more than halfway through the performance without being lynched... Well done! Unfortunately I can't be with you this evening, but hang in there, my heart goes out to you... In the meantime, ladies and gentlemen, five minutes intermission. (*Lower voice*) That'll be something...

*New crackling and the message ends.*

**Fred** – An intermission? That's not what was planned...

**Max** – If we let them leave the room, no one will come back, that's for sure.

**Fred** – So what do we do?

**Sam** – We improvise...

*Sam takes a toy gun out of his pocket, poorly imitated enough to be obvious that it's not real. It could also be a toy arrow gun.*

**Fred** – But come on...

**Sam** – Ladies and gentlemen, please remain seated. Nobody moves.

*A moment of hesitation.*

**Max** – This is no longer a performance, it's a hostage situation...

**Jacky** – It's pretty clear that it's fake, isn't it?

*Sam lowers his weapon.*

**Sam** – We're at the theatre! Everything is fake...

**Max** – Except the tickets...

**Jacky** – Excuse me, but... is this comedy going to last much longer?

*The other three check their watches.*

**Fred** – Don't worry, the worst is over.

**Jacky** – I need to be home before curfew, you know.

**Max** – I thought the curfew was over?

**Jacky** – Yes... but my mother-in-law decided to extend it indefinitely...

**Fred** – I'd say... another half an hour, right? So that the audience still feels like they got their money's worth.

**Sam** – I think this is going to be the longest half an hour of my life...

**Max** – What were we talking about? Oh yeah, you were telling us about your suicide attempt. So it didn't work...

**Jacky** – Yes... I've failed at everything in my life. Even my suicide... That's what my mother-in-law always tells me...

**Sam** – I still think there's something to be done about this mother-in-law, right?

**Jacky** – That was my second attempt...

**Fred** – You know the proverb?

**Jacky** – What proverb?

**Fred** – "Third time's the charm!" I'm sure the next time will be the right one... (*The others give him a disapproving look.*) Well, I mean... there's always a light at the end of the tunnel, right?

**Jacky** – Yes... when you're dead, they say.

**Sam** – And the first time, did you jump from the ground floor or...?

**Jacky** – The first time, I chose gas... but it had been cut off the day before.

**Fred** – That's truly inhumane. Cutting off gas like that without warning, to poor people who have no other way of ending their lives...

**Max** – By the way, what do you do for a living? It's curious... your face looks strangely familiar to me, and your voice rings a bell..

**Sam** – Yes, me too... I feel like I've heard this voice somewhere before...

**Fred** – Maybe in a theatre?

**Jacky** – It's possible, I am... Well, I was...

**Sam** – Yes?

**Jacky** – Theatre critic.

**Fred** – A critic?

**Jacky** – It's been seven years since I had the opportunity to practice, but...

**Max** – And you're here to review this show?

**Jacky** – For that, the play would have to be written first, wouldn't it?

**Sam** – Yes, of course...

**Max** – So, in fact, you're the only professional here?



**Jacky** – You know... when you're a critic, it means you can't do anything else.

**Sam** – Still... after criticizing the plays you consider bad, you must know how to write a good one, don't you?

**Fred** – It's true that having the critic write the play directly is much safer.

**Jacky** – Well, I think I'll leave you now. Let me know when you've got a real show for me...

*He tries to leave, walking painfully with his crutches. Max steps in.*

**Max** – No way!

**Jacky** – What?

**Max** – Search him!

**Fred** – What's gotten into you?

**Max** – I'm sure he's lying. I want to see his papers.

**Jacky** – But...

*Max takes the toy gun from Sam's hands and aims it at Jacky.*

**Max** – Are you going to give me your papers or not?

**Jacky** – Alright, here they are.

*He hands over his identification card. Max takes it and examines it.*

**Max** – Jacky Ramirez... I knew it...

**Fred** – Jacky Ramirez?

**Max** – He's the author of this play that hasn't been written yet.

**Sam** – Of course... It was his voice in that recorded message!

**Fred** – And he's got the nerve to come and witness our disaster!

**Sam** – The murderer always returns to the scene of his crime.

**Max** – And the author always attends the premieres of his plays.

**Fred** – Even when he hasn't had the courage to write them.

*Jacky drops his crutches, removes any fake beard or glasses, and starts walking normally, suddenly full of energy. He looks like a completely different character, younger.*

**Jacky** – Okay, I confess, it's all my fault... well, almost.

**Sam** – Almost? Give us one reason not to hang you right now from the stage curtain.

**Jacky** – All the theatres have been closed for seven years! I thought the play would never be performed! So what's the point of writing it?

**Max** – Anyway, we're keeping you with us. If we're going to be lynched by the audience, you'll be hanged with us.

**Sam** – But maybe you have an idea to get us out of this? You're the author, after all... It's your job to have ideas, right?

**Jacky** – If you think ideas just come to you.

**Max** – So you don't have any at all?

**Jacky** – Not a single one.

**Fred** – What a ball and chain !

**Max** – Then what do you suggest?

**Jacky** – I don't know... A collective creation?

**Sam** – What's that?

**Jacky** – It was very trendy seven years ago. No author anymore. Not even a director. Everyone contributes to writing the play: the actors, the technicians, the stage manager, the prompter... Even the cashier and the ushers.

**Sam** – What's the point?

**Jacky** – Mainly? It saves on author's rights...

**Fred** – And does it work?

**Jacky** – Not often, but... it happens.

**Max** – It's not easy.

**Jacky** – Do you trust me, yes or no?

**Sam** – No. But do we really have a choice...?

**Jacky** – I'll fetch some paper and a pen to write down everyone's ideas, and we'll start right away, okay? I'll take the opportunity to tidy up this... Accidents can happen so quickly...

*He takes the gun from Max's hands and exits. The three others look at each other, worried. Silence.*

**Fred** – Do you think he'll come back?

**Max** – We should never have let him go...

**Sam** – I'm going to see if he's not taking advantage of the situation to sneak away...

**Fred** – He's armed, I don't know if that's wise.

**Sam** – Do you think he could kill us?

**Fred** – It wouldn't be the first time an author gets rid of his characters because he realize he can't do anything with them...

*Max is about to leave hen we hear, as if at the beginning of a play, a series of quick blows with a stick on the floor, followed by three slower ones. We hear the first and the second. The third is a gunshot. The three others are stunned.*

**Fred** – It sounded like a gunshot, didn't it?

**Sam** – I'll go check.

**Max** – I'll come with you.

*They exit.*

**Fred** – Oh my God... Maybe I should leave too while they're not here... And I'd advise you to do the same.

*She starts to walk away, but her path is blocked by the other two who return carrying Jacky's supposed corpse.*

**Fred** – What is this?

**Max** – It's the author.

**Fred** – He doesn't seem well...

**Sam** – He's dead.

**Fred** – But what happened?

*Max shows the gun that Jacky still holds in his hand.*

**Max** – Apparently, he shot himself in the head.

**Sam** – You were right... The third attempt was the right one...

**Fred** – Wait, was that in the play, or...?

**Max** – I confess, I'm not quite sure...

**Fred** – And are you sure he's dead?

**Sam** – He shot himself, I'm telling you!

**Fred** – I don't know who'll be next... Because this performance is looking more and more like mass suicide...

*Fred examines the gun.*

**Fred** – It's a theatre gun. It's made of plastic...

*Max examines the wound, touches the temple covered in a red mess, and then puts his finger in his mouth.*

**Max** – It's raspberry jam...

*Fred approaches and repeats the same gestures.*

**Fred** – I'd say it's more like cherries...

**Max** – So he's not really dead.

**Sam** – In theatre, as long as you play dead, you're dead.

**Max** – So, who's going to write the play?

*Silence.*

**Fred** – Is there any way to bring him back to life?

**Sam** – With a bit of whisky, perhaps?

**Fred** – It's apple juice.

**Max** – But since he's not really dead.

*Max makes him drink directly from the bottle. Jacky regains consciousness.*

**Jacky** – What's happening? Where am I?

**Sam** – On stage. You're acting in a play you haven't written yet.

**Fred** – The audience is there, and they're waiting for us to finally say something interesting.

*Jacky seems dismayed.*

**Jacky** – It's a nightmare...

**Max** – As you say...

*Jacky stands up and addresses the audience.*

**Jacky** – Excuse me, this is truly a terrible play, I know. Perhaps the worst of my career...

**Fred** – Can we even call it a play...?

**Jacky** – You have to understand me too. Seven years... I thought live performance was dead for good.

**Fred** – But no, it rises from its ashes once again.

**Jacky** – Theatre maybe, but as for me... I'm afraid I have nothing left to say...

**Sam** – Well, we don't care about your feelings! We're here to save our own skins. And without a good story, we don't exist!

**Jacky** – Sorry... I can't think of anything right now...

**Max** – If you're out of inspiration... then explain to us how to write a play, and we'll figure it out!

**Jacky** – It's not a recipe, either! It's more like... how to make a successful mayonnaise.

**Sam** – Still, there must be some tricks of the author's trade that you could give us.

**Jacky** – They say that to write a good play, all you have to do is let the characters speak...

**Sam** – But...?

**Jacky** – However, the characters need to be interesting! But you are completely inconsistent...

**Sam** – Now it's going to be our fault... But he's going to get it if he carries on like this.

**Fred** – So that's it... We are characters without an author...

**Max** – Creatures without a creator.

**Sam** – At least we are free.

**Max** – Yes... but we'll have to find a reason to exist on our own if we want to stay alive.

**Fred** – A bit like humanity in general, in the end, orphaned by its creator, condemned to self-generate... and not knowing what to do with its freedom.

**Jacky** – You're right... Life is a theatre... God is dead... and I'm not feeling very well myself.

*A moment. Their gazes meet.*

**Fred** – Do you think that could be the idea for the play?

**Sam** – Three actors called together for the reading of a play yet to be written...

**Jacky** – Yes, why not...? There, I believe we have the beginning of something...

**Fred** – So this is it, the beginning?

**Max** – I would rather say it's ending, isn't it?

**Sam** – Let's say it's the end of the beginning.

**Fred** – Or the beginning of the end...

**Jacky** – Well... So you don't need me any more?

**Max** – You can still stay and take notes...

*Jacky takes out a notebook and a pencil from his pocket and prepares to write.*

**Fred** – I have a feeling we're going to have a triumph.

**Sam** – Or a flop, whatever. As long as we play!

**Fred** – Seven years of intermission... No more theatres, no more actors, no more authors...

**Sam** – But the show goes on.

**Jacky** – As long as there's an audience!

*Fade out.*

**The End.**

## *About the author*

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

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

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

***Other plays by the same author translated in English:***

*A Cuckoo's nest*

*A simple business dinner*

*An innocent little murder*

*Casket for two*

*Cheaters*

*Crisis and Punishment*

*Critical but stable*

*Four stars*

*Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>*

*Heads or Tails*

*Him and Her*

*Is there a pilot in the audience?*

*Just a moment before the end of the world*

*Lovestruck at Swindlemore Hall*

*New Year's Eve at the Morgue*

*One marriage out of two*

*Quarantine*

*Running on Empty*

*Strip Poker*

*The Ideal Son-in-Law*

*The Smell of Money*

*The Window across the courtyard*

*The Worst Village in England*

*Welcome aboard!*



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