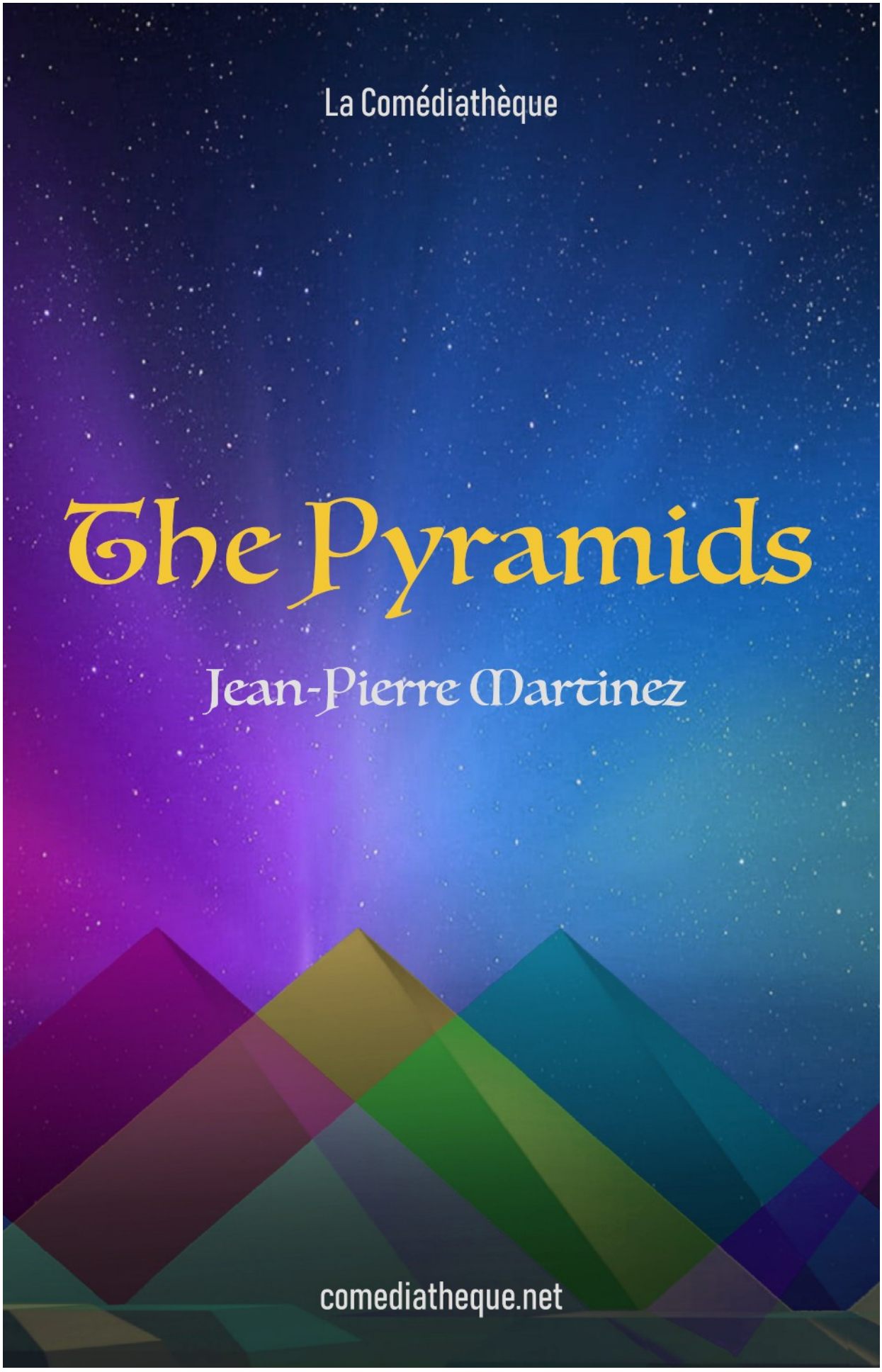

La Comédiathèque
The Pyramids
Jean-Pierre Martinez
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The Pyramids

Jean-Pierre Martinez

In a mysterious enclosed place, perhaps a psychiatric institution, or perhaps the theatre of the world, a handful of outcasts are being held for having lost their faith. Not only their faith in God, but their belief in the principles on which society itself rests. But what if the Creator no longer believed in his own creation? These doubters must urgently be persuaded to believe again, before their contagious scepticism brings the entire system crashing down...

Characters

Director

Assistant

Author

Actress

The characters in this symbolic play are archetypes, and their genders are not essential to the story. The genders used here are indicative and may be changed to suit each company's cast and artistic choices.

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An impersonal entrance hall, with a reception desk at its centre. Above it hangs a portrait of a white-bearded man who could be God the Father—or Santa Claus. The Assistant, a woman in military uniform, stands behind the desk, looking at a screen. The Director enters, wearing something resembling a cassock. The costumes, set and portrait need not be realistic: the play is essentially symbolic. The setting may even be futuristic, suggesting a place of worship, with the reception desk as an altar and the audience as the congregation at this strange service. Music helps create an atmosphere that is at once fantastic and faintly absurd.

Director – Seek and you shall find... Yeah, right. I've looked everywhere, and I still can't find him...

Assistant – I don't see him on the surveillance cameras either.

Director – And yet someone's definitely missing.

Assistant – Do you think he might have climbed over the wall?

Director – The wall? You mean the ramparts?

Assistant – Yes, you're right... We've always been told there's nothing beyond the ramparts.

Director – Makes you wonder what they're for...

Assistant – And who, exactly, they're supposed to be protecting us from.

Director – Who... or what?

Assistant – What?

Director – Are these ramparts to prevent an invasion... or an escape?

Assistant – Maybe both.

Director – Well, we do need to set boundaries.

Assistant – And prohibitions.

Director – Once you start drawing lines, there's no end to the limits you can set.

Assistant – Sometimes I feel imprisoned inside myself too. As though I were sealed in a tomb, surrounded by an invisible wall. Inside, I'm all-powerful. Outside, I'm nothing...

Director – I'd never thought of it that way, but you're right... We're all buried alive inside a pyramid, feeling our way through a dark labyrinth, looking for a crack that might let in a little light.

Assistant – Each of us is the god of a private world. Through the narrow slits we call eyes, we gaze at the countless universes around us, some friendlier than others. Until we collide with another planet by accident... or suffer the ultimate fate of being swallowed by a black hole.

Director – Right... but that still doesn't tell us where he's gone.

Assistant – If this wall is impenetrable, how come he's no longer here?

Director – If he's always been here, he couldn't have left.

Assistant – And if he's not always been here, how did he get in?

Director – But one fact remains: a piece is missing from this enormous game of chess. And without it, the whole game may fall apart.

Assistant – A piece?

Director – A key piece.

Assistant – The king.

Director – The grand architect of the universe. The one who designed the plans.

Assistant – One Supreme Being goes missing, and the whole world goes to pieces...

Director – But he was here, wasn't he? He's the one who built this wall!

Assistant – Are you sure it was him?

Director – Unless he built the wall and then somehow got himself shut out.

Assistant – Locked out of his own creation?

Director – You're right, it's a crazy story...

Assistant – So, could there be something on the other side of the wall? Someone?

Director – How can we know? There are no windows in these walls, which are supposed to protect us from the nothingness that threatens to overtake us.

Assistant – No openings. Not even a peephole...

Director – Of course not. There's nothing on the other side. The world is like an old sock: turn it inside out as often as you like, your foot still goes in the same end.

Assistant – Yes... but if the sock has a hole, a toe could always slip through to the outside.

Director – A hole in the wall...? Through which nothingness itself might creep in?

Assistant – The real question is who knitted the sock...

A pause.

Director – He'll turn up again, like he always does.

Assistant – That's been the case so far.

Director – So all we can do is hope.

Assistant – And maybe pray... But to whom?

Director – Come on. We have to believe...

Neither looks particularly convinced, but they do their best.

Assistant – I can't remember... What exactly was he here for?

Director – Like all the others. A serious crisis of faith...

Assistant – A crisis? Does he need a doctor? With writers, it's usually the liver...

Director – Not his liver. His faith! He doesn't believe any more. He's lost his faith...

Assistant – Oh, I see... *(A pause)* I hope it's not contagious.

Director – Believe me, it's much easier to give up drinking than to start believing again.

Assistant – Faith is like fitness. Once you've lost it, getting it back is hard work.

Director – How very true. And so beautifully put. I sometimes wonder where you get these ideas...

The assistant looks at the director, unsure whether he was being sincere or sarcastic.

Assistant – So... he was an inmate.

Director – Or a member of the company. I can't remember. (Worried) Perhaps a board member. Or even the director...

Assistant – The director? I thought that was you!

Director – I'm just the acting director.

Assistant – Ah, yes, that explains it...

He looks back at her, questioning the meaning of her comment.

Director – In any case, he's the author...

Assistant – That's unfortunate... What does he actually look like?

Director – That's the trouble. No one's seen him for ages. In all the artist's impressions, he's got a long beard.

Assistant – Artist's impressions? Like that enormous portrait hanging in the hall, you mean?

They both look at the painting.

Director – Of course, it could be a false beard.

Assistant – Or maybe the painting is just a fake, plain and simple.

Director – A fake beard in a fake portrait...

Assistant – That doesn’t help us much...

Director – And after all this time, he might have cut it off.

Assistant – Shaved it off?

Director – His false beard!

Assistant – With fake scissors...

Director – It's not going to be easy to recognise him.

Assistant – No...

Director – Just imagine Santa Claus without a beard. Real or false. Would you recognise him?

Assistant – But Santa Claus doesn't actually exist. We agree on that, don't we?

Director – Right.

A pause.

Assistant – Have you checked both sides of the stage? The garden side and the courtyard side?

Director – On the garden side? All I saw were gnomes...

Assistant – We're supposed to say 'people of short stature' these days...

Director – Very well. All I saw were... people of short stature in the garden.

Assistant – You mean garden gnomes?

Director – I'll try the courtyard side. Otherwise we'll have to take more drastic measures...

He exits towards the courtyard side. The Assistant returns to her screen. The Author enters, a man with no beard, wearing shorts and a flowered shirt. He has no shoes: one foot is bare, the other wears a sock with a hole in it. He wanders aimlessly around the hall, looking lost. Eventually, the Assistant notices him.

Assistant – Sir? Can I help you?

Author – I've lost track of the days... What day is it, exactly?

Assistant – Exactly? Sunday, sir. Sunday, to be precise.

Author – Sunday...? Are you sure?

Assistant – Well... Yesterday was Sunday, wasn't it?

Author – But in that case, today would be...

Assistant – In this distinguished institution, sir, every day is Sunday...

Author – Oh... (To himself) Must be boring as hell, then.

The author looks around, disoriented.

Assistant – Are you looking for something? Or someone?

Author – To be honest... I'm not really sure anymore.

Assistant – You don't know what you're looking for?

Author – I don't even know who I am! Do you have any idea?

Assistant – Honestly... I don't. Should I?

Author – So I guess I'm not someone famous?

Assistant – I couldn't say for sure...

Author – If I were famous, you'd recognise me, right?

Assistant – Some famous people have faces nobody would recognise, you know.

Author – Really? Like who, for example?

Assistant – Oh, I don't know... Jesus Christ, Napoleon, Jean-Pierre Martinez...

Author – Napoleon?

Assistant – Would you recognise Napoleon if you saw him on the street?

Author – Probably not...

Assistant – As for Jesus, the only picture we have from the period is the Turin Shroud. And it's rather out of focus...

Author – Martinez, you said... That name rings a bell.

Assistant – I might know yours.

Author – Mine...?

Assistant – Your name! Have you got any identification?

Author – I don't know... What is identification for? To remind you who you are?

Assistant – More importantly, to prove to everyone else that you're entitled to exist.

Author – So without an identity card, you have no identity. And no right to exist?

Assistant *(suddenly stern)* – Your papers, please.

He searches his pockets and pulls out a business card.

Author – I have this...

Assistant – Let's see... *(She takes the card and examines it)* That's a business card, not an identity card.

Author – A business card? What on earth is that?

Assistant – It proves that not only do you exist, you're somebody worth knowing.

Author – So you think I might be somebody important...

Assistant – Depends what it says. (She studies the card) Oh, I see...

Author – See what?

Assistant *(reading)* – God... So it's you!

Author – Me?

Assistant – We've been looking for you everywhere.

Author – Really?

Assistant – You gave us quite a scare, you know... We thought you'd disappeared for good...

Author – Now you're frightening me. God? Are you sure?

Assistant – Well, that's what it says on your business card...

The Assistant hands back his business card.

Author – Isn't it usually mad people who think they're God?

Assistant – Just a moment. Do you merely think you're God—or are you actually God?

Author – Neither, I think.

Assistant – But it says 'God' right here on your card.

Author – Maybe it's just my name.

Assistant – Your name?

Author – My surname! You're the one who thinks I'm God. Perhaps you're the ones who are mad!

Assistant – Now, don't be so modest... If this place were a psychiatric hospital, I'm sure you'd be running it.

Author – I'm not sure that's entirely comforting...

The director returns.

Director – No one stage left either... Apart from a few ghosts of writers. What about you?

Assistant – I found him!

Director – Really? It's you! We were getting worried. We've been looking everywhere!

Author – Well, here I am... Although I do sometimes have lapses. Where are we, by the way?

Director – Where? Come on... You don't remember?

Author – Remember what?

Director – Surely you at least remember who you are?

Author – No.

Assistant – But you're a very famous author!

Author – An author?

Director – A playwright! No, more than that... a creator of worlds!

Assistant – If we're all here, it's thanks to you!

Director – And we're all at your service.

Author – Famous? So people know who I am, even though I don't?

Assistant – Do they know you? They practically worship you! You're their idol! Their God!

Author – I don't remember anything.

Director – Believe me, no one has forgotten you.

Author – Well, sometimes I forget myself...

Assistant *(aside to the Director)* – He certainly doesn't seem to believe any more.

Director – 'Know yourself and you will know the universe and the gods.' Easier said than done...

Assistant – If God doesn't know himself...

Director – I told you... Crisis of faith...

Assistant – It's sad to see.

Director – And it's also quite dangerous.

Assistant – Dangerous?

Director – If he's the one who wrote this play...

Assistant – What play?

Director – The one we're performing right now!

Assistant – Him? Are you sure?

Director – Honestly... I'm not sure about anything anymore...

Assistant – Exactly what I feared. It must be contagious...

Director *(to the Author)* – You can't remember who you are, but surely you remember something about the play?

Author – The play...

Assistant – Not every plot twist or every line. Just the broad outline, perhaps?

Author – I haven't had an idea for a play in years. I was thinking of writing my memoirs, but...

Director – Writing memoirs when you've lost your memory...

Author – Do you think they'd sell? If I was famous, like you say...

Assistant – Selling your memories when you can't remember them...?

Director – Well, someone could write his autobiography for him.

Assistant – A ghostwriter, you mean?

Director – Exactly. I've seen a few ghostwriters backstage. They were haunting the place, looking for work...

Assistant – An autobiography written by a ghostwriter... Well, why not?

Author – My autobiography? I'd be curious to read it.

Director – Who knows, maybe reading it would help you regain your memory.

Assistant – True... But finding a ghostwriter to write the life of an amnesiac author, hoping it will jog his memory...

Director – And that he might be able to give us the script of the play we're in the middle of acting out...

Assistant – It might take some time...

Director – Indeed.

Assistant – And at this rate, the whole performance is about to fall apart, isn't it?

Director – You think so?

Assistant – Even the audience doesn't believe in it any more. Look!

The director and assistant turn to the audience.

Director – You're right. They've lost faith in this play as well.

Assistant – I can see one or two nodding off. Just like Sunday mass.

Director – For now, it's the author we're losing...

They turn to the author, who still looks utterly disoriented.

Assistant – God? He looks more like a homeless man, doesn't he?

Director – Or worse...

Assistant – Worse?

Director – An undocumented immigrant.

Assistant – You're not far off... I asked for his papers, and he only has a business card.

Director – What if he's not really the author of the play, but just another character, like us?

Assistant – A character...?

Director – A character written by an author! Another impostor! He might only be God in this play... that nobody's written yet!

Assistant – Ah, I see... Or maybe not really... This is all starting to get a bit confusing...

Director – I'll take him to the Memory Archive. While he's waiting for his memory to come back, he can read somebody else's biography. It might inspire him.

Assistant – It had better. We're running out of time...

Director – Come along, my good man. You'll find that some people's lives are much more interesting than God's...

The director exits with the author.

The Actress enters. She is conservatively dressed and carries a suitcase. She approaches the desk, behind which the Assistant is standing.

Assistant – Good morning, madam. I don't think we've met. Are you staying with us?

Actress – No.

Assistant – But you've brought a suitcase... Are you here to be admitted?

Actress – Have you seen my cat?

Assistant – A cat? No, sorry. And I should warn you that pets aren't allowed here.

Actress – You don't like cats?

Assistant – I didn't say I disliked cats. I said animals aren't permitted on the premises.

Actress – Did you know that in ancient Egypt, cats were considered sacred?

Assistant – If you say so...

Actress – They were believed to ward off evil spirits.

Assistant – I didn't know that. Though I suppose they still protect houses from mice.

Actress – Cats were associated with a goddess who had the head of a cat herself. The goddess of pleasure and fertility.

Assistant – By the way, I'm allergic to cat hair.

Actress – I've always been wary of people who don't like animals...

Assistant – I'm not particularly fond of old people either, but we still let them in. Now, what can I do for you, madam?

Actress – I'm looking for my husband.

Assistant – I thought you were looking for your cat.

Actress – You might as well call me mad!

Assistant – Didn't you say you were looking for your cat?

Actress – Yes, I was.

Assistant – And your husband isn't a cat, I assume.

Actress – I wish he were. Life would be much simpler.

Assistant – Simpler for whom, exactly?

Actress – My husband's staying here. I've come to visit him... with my cat.

Assistant – Unfortunately, let me repeat...

Actress – I know cats aren't allowed. I read the rules. That's precisely why I put mine in the suitcase.

Assistant – A cat in a suitcase?

Actress – But when I arrived and opened the case, the cat had made a run for it.

Assistant – But, madam, who is your husband?

Actress – He's a playwright.

Assistant – Oh, really?

Actress – He's having trouble with his memory. The last time I saw him, he looked rather depressed. Disillusioned, even. He doesn't remember being married to me at all.

Assistant – So you've come to remind him of the good old days, as it were.

Actress – Honestly... I'm not entirely sure myself.

Assistant – You're not sure if you're married to him?

Actress – I know there was a wedding. I just can't remember whether it took place in a church or on a stage.

Assistant – Churches are rather like theatres, when you think about it. Except that the play never changes, and the performances can be rather dull.

Actress – I'm an actress, you see. I've played thousands of roles in my life. And at my age, I sometimes have trouble telling reality from fiction. Truth from make-believe...

Assistant – I think I understand... I...

Actress *(interrupting her)* – When I was a young leading lady, almost every play I appeared in ended with a wedding. I've married hundreds of men over the years. Mostly princes... Quite a few soldiers... A handful of shepherds... Three firefighters... Two computer specialists... A serial killer... Even a priest!

Assistant – Okay, but I'm not sure I...

Actress – I've died at least a hundred times on stage.

Assistant – Died?

Actress – So I no longer know whether this man really is my husband. And if he is, I wonder whether he's a widower.

Assistant – A widower?

The Actress opens her suitcase. It is empty.

Actress – One thing I do know for certain: the cat is no longer in the case...

Assistant – That I can confirm. The suitcase is as empty as Christ's tomb just before the Resurrection.

The director returns.

Director – I gave him the Bible to read. That should keep him busy for quite a while... Good morning, madam. Is someone seeing to you?

Assistant – This lady thinks she might be the wife of the author.

Director – Really? I didn't know he was married... Though you say you're not entirely sure. But I see you're wearing a wedding ring...

Actress – It could be fake.

Director – Fake?

Actress – A stage prop!

Assistant – Madam is a retired actress...

Actress – Let me tell you, young lady, an actress is never unemployed and never retires. She's merely between engagements, waiting for the offer that will turn out to be the role of her life.

Director – Quite right, madam. The important thing is to believe. Otherwise, the whole thing comes crashing down... (Aside to the Assistant) Find this poor old lunatic a dressing room where she can pull herself together, while we look for a part for her. Because until we have the script...

Assistant – Yes, the world is one enormous audition. Actors queue up to try their luck. A few get leading roles, others supporting parts. Most are no more than extras...

Director – First we'd need the screenplay.

Assistant – I thought this was a play?

Director – Film, play... It's a metaphor! This is a symbolic work, isn't it? Not a bedroom farce... At least, I don't think so...

Assistant – My dear Magdalene, would you come with me?

Actress – Magdalene? That's not my name!

Assistant – It is here...

The assistant exits with the actress.

Director – How odd... I could have sworn I saw a cat earlier. Yet animals are strictly forbidden here. (To the audience) In ancient Egypt, as you probably know... Oh, someone's told you already? Never mind. By the way, if any of you happen to have a copy of the script... No? Perhaps somebody who came yesterday? No, of course, that's asking too much... Still, if you remember anything, do speak up. (To himself) First they get rid of the prompter, and now we haven't even got an author to write the lines... Where was I? Oh yes, I leave at this point. I think. But which way? Stage left or stage right...?

He exits.

The Author enters carrying something resembling a metal detector, which he sweeps diligently over the floor. The Actress follows with a similar device and begins searching with equal determination. Neither seems surprised to see the other; they ignore each other and continue their search until, after a while, they come face to face.

Actress – Oh, I'm sorry, I didn't see you there.

Author – Not at all.

They both take a moment to rest.

Actress – Are you looking for something in particular?

Author – I've lost my faith. What about you?

Actress – I've lost my cat.

Author – Ah, I see...

Actress – And have you found it?

Author – Your cat?

Actress – Your faith!

Author – Not yet, unfortunately.

Actress – Oh...

Author – I did find a sock, though.

Actress – A sock...?

Author – A sock with a hole in it.

Actress – Better than nothing.

Author – If you happen to find its partner...

Actress – The other one...?

Author – The other sock!

Actress – Oh, right...

A pause.

Author – Have you ever found anything worth finding?

Actress – A pair of scissors, about a week ago.

Author – Really? What can you do with a pair of scissors...?

Actress – I cut off my beard. And you?

Author – I found a piece earlier.

Actress – A piece? You mean... a play?

Author – No, a coin!

Actress – Oh, right... It's just that I'm an actress, and I'm looking for a part.

Author – Not with a metal detector, surely?

Actress – You never know. It could be a golden opportunity!

They exchange rather forced smiles.

Author – So, you've never found any treasure, have you?

Actress – No, never. What about you?

Author – Besides this coin...

Actress – Perhaps it fell out of someone's sock full of cash.

Author – A sock full of cash...?

Actress – The sock you found. With the hole in it...

A pause.

Author – Sometimes I wonder whether there's any point in going on like this.

Actress – What choice do we have? We have to go on believing. Otherwise...

Author – Otherwise we'd feel like fools for having spent money on these ridiculous machines.

Actress – Most believers never see God while they're alive. And yet they hope to meet him once they're dead.

Author – True. You have to keep the faith.

Actress – And when we lose it, we have to do our best to find it again.

Author – I guess I should get back to searching, then.

Actress – Have you looked stage right?

Author – And stage left.

Actress – Let's double-check just in case. You never know...

They resume their prospecting until they exit backstage.

The assistant returns. She sneezes.

Assistant – I think there's a cat around here... I've been sneezing non-stop!

She exits.

The Director enters, finds the stage empty and hesitates.

Director – Oh... Am I too early? Or too late? Sorry about that...

He exits.

The author and the actress return.

Author – I think today is my lucky day. I found a ring.

Actress – Let me see... Ah yes... Is it gold?

Author – Looks like it.

Actress – Could be a wedding ring.

Author – A wedding ring?

Actress – It looks like one.

Author – Well, it's definitely not yours—you already have one on your finger.

Actress – Maybe it's yours.

Author – You think?

Actress – You're not wearing a wedding ring.

Author – That's true.

A pause. The Author slips the ring onto the ring finger of his left hand.

Actress – You wouldn't happen to be my husband, would you?

Author – By any chance?

Actress – Then you wouldn't be a widower, and I wouldn't be dead...

Author – Who knows...

Actress – Or maybe we're both dead.

Author – Yes...

Actress – What's your name?

Author – I don't really know.

Actress – Do you have some form of ID?

Author – I have a business card.

He hands it to her.

Actress *(reading)* – God...

Author – If you're my wife, would that make you a goddess?

Actress – Now that wouldn't surprise me in the least...

She takes his arm. He's a bit surprised. They leave arm in arm.

The director returns and turns around, seemingly watching them depart. The assistant also enters the scene.

Director – Ah, I was looking for you...

Assistant – Who were those two people?

Director – I don't know. But they seem to have found each other.

Assistant – They look vaguely familiar... They seemed a bit dodgy, didn't they?

Director – What makes you say that?

Assistant – They had the faces of murderers.

Director – Some murderers have the faces of angels, you know.

Assistant – And some murderers have the faces of murderers...

Director – I prefer to believe their looks were misleading.

Assistant – Of course...

Director – Some character actors spend their whole lives playing serial killers simply because they look like psychopaths. Yet they're perfectly sane and have never killed anyone.

Assistant – So looking like a murderer can actually help you find work.

Director – Let's just say they looked a bit rough. When you don't know, and you have a choice, it's always best to believe the more reassuring story.

Assistant – You're right. If there's nothing we can do about it, why imagine the worst?

Director – That's why we invented God, isn't it? We prefer to believe our creator means well by us.

Assistant – Even though he might be a dangerous psychopath.

Director – It doesn't protect us from anything, but as long as everything's fine, we can always pray for it to last.

Assistant – We can thank God for not giving us all the suffering He dishes out to most of humanity every day.

Director – And if a roof tile lands on our head, we can thank God it wasn't a concrete block.

Assistant – We comfort ourselves as best we can. Children have teddy bears and imaginary friends.

Director – As long as they don't lose them.

Assistant – Speaking of which, how's our author doing?

Director – He's finished the Bible. Skimmed it, I suspect. It seems to have left him rather cold.

Assistant – It's a weighty volume.

Director – I even hit him over the head with it a few times to help the message sink in. But he still remembers nothing. And it doesn't seem to have inspired him either.

Assistant – I've always thought that if God ever read the Bible, he'd probably find it rather dull...

Director – Either way, it hasn't brought back his faith...

Assistant – When even God stops believing in himself...

Director – When the creator stops believing in his own creation...

Assistant – When the writer loses his inspiration...

Director – When the actors don't have a script to follow...

Assistant – When the audience starts checking their watches.

Director – And some even start to fall asleep.

Assistant – We're standing on the edge of the abyss!

Director – Doesn't our whole world rely on belief?

Assistant – Take banknotes. You go into a shop, fill your trolley, then hand over a few bits of paper supposedly worth as much as everything you've taken.

Director – It's called fiat currency.

Assistant – Because its value depends on trust.

Director – The person who accepts those notes believes they can exchange them later for goods of equivalent value.

Assistant – Economic growth is also driven by confidence.

Director – People spend because they expect a pay rise. They get one because spending keeps the economy going, unemployment falls, and workers become harder to find.

Assistant – A self-fulfilling prophecy.

Director – Just like the stock market. You buy shares because you expect their price to rise... And because everyone buys them, the price rises.

Assistant – So when everyone gets cold feet, growth slows and the stock market tumbles.

Director – Especially when their socks have holes in them.

Assistant – The entire system is held up by faith.

Director – All it takes is for someone to stop believing, and the chain breaks. The whole structure collapses.

Assistant – It's the same for marriage.

Director – It's a contract based on trust.

Assistant – You exchange vows in front of two witnesses.

Director – You say two little words: 'I do.'

Assistant – And you're sentenced to monogamy for life.

Director – Men and women are rather like socks. It's hard to keep a pair together after several washes.

Assistant – And yet we always hope that the missing sock will turn up again one day.

Director – You keep the faith. You keep the whole machine turning with orphaned socks.

Assistant – Until one day you resign yourself to wearing odd socks.

Director – Then you buy a brand-new pair... hoping that this time they'll stay together for life.

Assistant – Life is a play. If just one character stops believing and refuses to play their part...

Director – If the director denounces the whole play as absurd...

Assistant – Worse still, if the author himself loses faith...

Director – To the point of forgetting to write the script...

Assistant – Everything falls apart.

Director – His characters wander about like lost souls... and the audience stops believing in them.

Assistant – The proof that an author exists is in his works.

Director – Just as the proof that Santa Claus exists is in the presents he brings us.

Assistant – As long as everyone believes, everything's fine...

Director – But God doesn't give us presents.

Assistant – At least not to everyone.

Director – God is Santa Claus without the presents. And yet we go on worshipping him for fear he might take away the few gifts we've already received from a Santa Claus who doesn't exist.

Assistant – But what happens if people stop believing?

Director – Imagine the Messiah returning to Earth one day to tell us God the Father doesn't exist.

Assistant – That even he has hit rock bottom and doesn't believe in anything any more...

Director – And that he's not even sure he still knows who he is.

Assistant – Except perhaps that he's the son of one of the Three Wise Men.

Director – Though he couldn't tell us which one.

Assistant – That would be the end of the world...

The Author enters in shorts and mismatched, hole-ridden socks. They stare at him.

Author – What? What's going on?

Director *(to the Assistant)* – We can't allow this to go on...

Assistant – It's clear as day.

Director – Fetch the machine!

Assistant – I'm on it...

She exits.

Director – Lie down here, my good man...

Author – But I'm not ill, I assure you. I feel fine. I've even found my wife again...

Director – Everything will be all right. You'll see...

The worried Author lies on the counter. The Assistant returns carrying one of the metal detectors and hands it to the Director. He passes it over the Author's body, starting at his feet.

Assistant – What did you find?

Director – Well, for a start, his socks don't match...

Assistant – Not a good sign... Anything else?

The Director moves the detector over the Author's hand.

Director – He's wearing a wedding ring on his left hand.

Assistant – He did mention he found his wife.

Director – Do you think he's lying?

Assistant – Even if he remembers being married, that doesn't mean he has recovered his faith in the institution of marriage.

The Director passes the detector over the Author's head.

Director – And although this instrument is extremely sensitive, it detects not a trace of moral values or eternal truths in that sick brain.

Assistant – Well, an author's job is to make up stories...

Director – In a head like that, how can we tell fact from fiction...?

Assistant – Perhaps the things he's invented are the truest things in there...

Director – Wait, I think I heard it beep...

Assistant *(to the Author)* – Open your mouth... (He opens it. She leans forward to look inside) It's a gold tooth...

Director – You can close your mouth now.

The Author snaps his mouth shut. The Assistant jumps back, clutching her nose.

Assistant – You could have warned me! He almost bit my nose off!

Director – Sorry, I...

Assistant – What should we do with him...?

Director – We have no choice. We must neutralise this subversive element. He's trampling on everything we hold sacred and demoralising the residents of our distinguished institution.

Assistant – Do you think so?

Director – Stay right there, my friend...

The Director and the Assistant leave. The Author sits up.

Author *(to the audience)* – Apparently I'm the author. Can you believe that? Well, the author... the character playing the author in this play. The real author is obviously not here. Does he even exist? Nobody's ever seen him, at least not in this place. So they've given me the part. But I don't know this play! They expect me to lend some direction to this absurd story, to feed everybody their lines. And because I can't, they blame me! I never asked for any of this! Why was I, of all people, chosen to play God? God doesn't exist! Well, yes, he does, but... we invented him. To reassure ourselves. To give some meaning to all this absurdity. And we're not doing a very good job of it... In truth, human beings are trapped inside a body that is both shelter and prison. We can glimpse the universe only through the narrow openings of this space-time sarcophagus, buried at the end of a maze deep inside a windowless pyramid. Our restricted view of the world has led us to invent religions in our own image, asking naïve questions about origins and beginnings: creation out of nothing, a creator, and therefore a god. Faced with a problem too vast to grasp, we cling to the only question we can formulate, even though it makes no sense: who created something that has always existed? We would rather ask that than acknowledge that a part can never comprehend the whole. We try to explain the origin and purpose of the universe in terms of our own limitations, the beginning and end of an individual life. We forget that life and death follow each other in a perpetual cycle. If eternity has no end, how could it have a beginning? If nothing is created and everything is transformed, how could everything arise from nothing? In the vain hope of understanding the world, we redraw it in our own image. But humanity can never encompass the world. It is the world that encompasses humanity. God did not create the universe. Humanity invented that myth to give life meaning, and clings to it like a shipwrecked sailor to a plank of wood. But when creation sinks into an ocean of meaninglessness, its creator drowns with it.

The actress returns, still carrying her suitcase.

Actress – Jesus! Is that you?

Author – Jesus?

Actress – When we first met, your name was Jesus. Don't you remember?

Author – No.

Actress – It's just come back to me. Of course, you had a beard back then. Like me...

Author – Never mind that. You've got to help me. I think these people are planning to kill me...

Actress – Help you? How?

Author – Get me out of here, as fast as you can!

Actress – Unfortunately, once you're in, you never get out. Unless it's feet first.

Author – But where exactly are we?

Actress – Opinions differ. But most reasonable people agree that it's a madhouse.

Author – And you're a patient too?

Actress – Just a visitor. For the moment.

Author – There has to be a way to escape...

Actress – They have eyes everywhere. The only place I can think of is my suitcase...

The author looks at the suitcase.

Author – I'd have to be a contortionist to fit in there...

Actress – Or a cat. In ancient Egypt, you know...

Author – Yes, I know. I'm supposed to have written the play. But here they come! Go, Magdalene. Don't stay here...

She leaves.

The Director returns in his cassock, accompanied by the Assistant in military uniform, now wearing a plaster on her nose. Both look grim.

Director – Alas, after lengthy deliberation...

Author – You've only been gone five minutes!

Assistant – We have concluded that we cannot let you sow doubt in the minds of the faithful members of our holy congregation.

Director – For if faith alone can save us, doubt could plunge us all into the abyss of meaninglessness. And we're only just managing to cling to its edge with the help of a few elementary certainties.

Assistant – The value of work and the value of money.

Director – Economic growth and the Nasdaq index.

Assistant – Consumer confidence and monogamous marriage.

Director – Military morale and borders recognised by the United Nations.

Assistant – All the values you've trampled on so shamelessly...

Director – When we had such high hopes for you.

Assistant – Besides, every crisis needs a scapegoat. Your fate is sealed.

Author – My fate?

Director – We've reached our verdict, to be carried out immediately. You must accept the ultimate sacrifice.

Assistant – We're not monsters, though. We'll arrange a little ceremony to give the occasion some dignity.

Director – And after your death, we'll honour your memory every Sunday. You have our word.

Assistant – Every Sunday means every day, of course. It's always Sunday here.

Director – In fact, it's Christmas every day.

Assistant – We'll put up a statue. Organise pilgrimages.

Director – You can even work the occasional miracle, if you feel like it.

Assistant – And naturally you have the right to confess before you commend your soul to... your successor.

The Director stands on one side of the counter and the Author on the other. The Assistant marches off, clicking her heels together.

Director – The time has come to admit your faults and atone for your sins. I'm listening. You'll feel better with a clear conscience.

Author – I confess. I'm possessed by doubt.

Director – I have my doubts too, you know. But then, I'm not God... Besides, doesn't faith move mountains?

Author – Faith moves mountains... only to replace them with pyramids.

Director – Pyramids? I only know the ones in Egypt, guarded by the Sphinx. You know the Sphinx? That enormous cat that lost its nose. Speaking of noses, you almost took off my assistant's earlier...

Author – I mean the pyramid scheme used by the world's greatest financial swindlers to rob their victims. The fraudster promises fabulous returns, pockets the money from gullible investors, and pays the earliest investors with money taken from the next lot.

Director – And... does it work?

Author – Beautifully! As long as everyone believes, and new investors keep arriving in ever-increasing numbers. As long as the base expands fast enough to reward the people at the top. The scheme collapses the moment doubt sets in and fresh money stops flowing.

Director – And the pyramid comes crashing down...

Author – Religion runs on much the same principle. Since no one ever returns from the dead to tell us that heaven and hell exist only on Earth and that there's no God up there any more than down here, the deception can carry on indefinitely—so long as people believe. The fraudsters are never exposed.

Director – So you're calling the Pope a fraud?

Author – The greatest fraud in history! Just look at all the wealth piled up in the Vatican!

Director – Then why do people go on believing in God?

Author – Billionaires with degrees from the finest universities hand their fortunes to crooks who promise miraculous returns, hoping to make a few more millions they don't need. Why wouldn't the poorest people on Earth believe those who promise them paradise after death, if the promise stops them demanding even the means to live while they're alive? Of course, those who exploit them have every interest in keeping the system going.

Director – But that's monstrous...

Author – Precisely. When you create a monster, sooner or later it breaks free of its creator and devours everything in sight... including the people who made it. Eventually the system runs by itself, imposes its rules on everyone, and drives the whole planet towards disaster.

Director – Then how do we stop this infernal machine?

Author – Questioning everything is already an act of healthy rebellion. Perhaps then, one day, pyramids can be launching pads to the stars instead of windowless tombs.

The assistant enters.

Assistant – Well? Has he confessed?

Director – The trouble is... I'm beginning to have doubts myself...

Assistant – He's infected you! We must carry out the sentence at once, before the loss of faith spreads to us all!

Author – What exactly have I been condemned for?

Assistant – Atheism!

Author – But if I'm God, as you say...

Assistant – That only makes it worse.

Director – You don't even believe in yourself!

Assistant – We placed our fate in your hands, and once again you've betrayed our trust!

Director – And come to think of it... the world's largest religion is founded on the killing of a god, isn't it?

Assistant – We invented gods to fill the emptiness beyond our inner walls. We hoped to glimpse something through the cracks, on the other side of the boundary with nothingness. And now you tell us there's nothing there? No 'other side' beyond the flip side of a coin?

Director – That God decides things with a coin toss?

Assistant – That the universe gives birth to itself in an endless cycle without aim or purpose, existing simply to realise every possible outcome?

Director – The best of all possible worlds, and the worst...

Author – Exactly. Like authors, gods fulfil themselves by exploring all their possibilities.

Assistant – Which is why, when their imagination runs dry, they have to disappear and make room for others who can explore other realities.

Director – There you are! It's all for the best! You must admit you were running out of ideas, weren't you?

Assistant – Back to your cell now. Here's the key. Don't forget to lock up behind you.

The author leaves.

Director – Aren't you afraid he'll escape?

Assistant – Where could he go?

Director – Good point...

Assistant – We'll execute him tomorrow at dawn.

Director – Why not now?

Assistant – I don't know. Executions are always at dawn, aren't they?

Director – You're right. Best to respect tradition. What day is tomorrow?

Assistant – Sunday.

Director – Sundays are so boring. A little execution will entertain the residents.

Assistant – Then let's get some rest. Tomorrow we'll have to find a replacement.

Director – How about a cat?

Assistant – A cat?

Director – Did you know cats were sacred animals in ancient Egypt?

Assistant – Even the pharaohs worshipped a goddess with a cat's head.

Director – And at least cats are already convinced they're gods.

Assistant – Unlike that degenerate author who has started doubting himself.

Director – Have you heard this one? A dog and a cat arrive at the gates of heaven. The dog confesses his sins, swears he's sorry and begs Saint Peter to forgive him. Then Saint Peter turns to the cat and asks what he has to say for himself. The cat looks at him sitting on his throne and says, 'You're in my seat.'

Assistant – It's true. Cats seem naturally suited to divinity...

Director – Isn't the lion king of the jungle? Though it lives on the savannah...

Assistant – Unfortunately, I'm allergic to cat hair.

Director – We'll find a hairless cat!

Assistant – A hairless cat?

Director – They're called Sphynx cats. They come from Mexico.

Assistant – Back to pyramids again... and to that giant cat with no nose.

The Actress returns wearing a cat mask and carrying her suitcase.

Actress – The little cat is dead... But it has risen again...

They stare at her, bewildered.

Actress *(aside, to the suitcase)* – Are you all right in there? Not too cramped?

Director – A cat it is, then...

The Actress exits. The others follow. A pause. The Actress returns with her suitcase.

Actress – I told you. Once you're here, you never get out.

She puts the suitcase down, takes out a cloth and spreads it over the reception desk, which has become an altar. An Eye of Horus is visible on the hanging edge of the cloth. She takes an Egyptian statue of a sacred cat from the suitcase and places it in the centre. Then she turns the portrait around, revealing an image of herself wearing the cat mask, with pyramids in the background. She leaves with the suitcase. The Director and the Assistant return, dressed as a pharaoh and a queen, and stand on either side of the altar, facing the audience.

Director – Come on. Let's believe!

Assistant – Keep the faith!

They kneel, hands clasped in prayer. Sacred music. Cats meowing.

Blackout.

End.

About the author

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

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

https://jeanpierremartinez.net/

https://comediatheque.net/

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

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

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

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

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

https://jeanpierremartinezmusic.com/

Other plays by the same author translated in English:

Monologues
Happy Dogs
Like a fish in the air
Short Stories

Comedies for 2
A Thwarted Vocation
EuroStar
Heads and Tails
Him and Her
Is there a pilot in the audience?
Last chance encounter
New Year's Eve at the Morgue
Not even dead
Pentimento
Preliminaries
Running on empty
Russian Roulette at the Kremlin
The Costa Mucho Castaways
The Dressing Gown
The Joker
The Rope
The Window across the courtyard

Comedies for 3
A brief moment of eternity
A simple business dinner
An innocent little murder
Cards on the Table
Cheaters
Crash Zone
Fragile, Handle with care
Friday the 13th
Horizons
Ménage à trois
One small step for a woman, one giant leap backward for Mankind
The Ways of Chance

Comedies for 4
A Cuckoo's nest
A hell of a night
A Skeleton in the Closet
Back to stage
Bed and Breakfast
Casket for two
Crisis and Punishment
Déjà vu
Family Portrait
Family Tree
Four stars
Friday the 13th
Gay friendly
Hangover
Happy Hour
How to get rid of your best friends
Is there a critic in the audience?
Is there an author in the audience?
Just a moment before the end of the world
Lovestruck at Swindlemore Hall
One marriage out of two
Perfect In-laws
Quarantine
Requiem for a Stradivarius
Strip Poker
Surviving Mankind
The Deal
The Fishbowl
The Perfect Son-in-Law
The Pyramids
The Smell of Money
The Tourists
The Worst Best Man Ever

Comedies for 5 to 6
All's well that starts badly
Christmas Eve at the Police Station
Crisis and Punishment
Critical but Stable
Dead End Boulevard
In lieu of flowers...
King of Fools
The Castaways of New Year's Eve
The President's Draw
The Rebels
Traffic Jam on Graveyard Lane

Comedies for 7 or more
At the bar counter
Backstage Comedy
Blue Flamingos
Check to the Kings
Christmas Eve at the Police Station
False exit
In flagrante delirium
Just like a Christmas movie
Miracle at Saint Mary Juana Abbey
Music does not always soothe ...
Neighbours' Day
Nicotine
Of Vegetables and Books
Offside
Open Hearts
Reality Show
Save our Savings
Special Dedication
Stories and Prehistories
Such a lovely village
The House of Our Dreams
The Jackpot
The Performance is not cancelled
The Most Beautiful Village in France
The Worst Village in England
Welcome aboard!
White Coats, Dark Humour

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

All of Jean-Pierre Martinez's plays can be downloaded free of charge from his websites:

https://jeanpierremartinez.net/

https://comediatheque.net/

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