

The Tragical Historie of Maximilien Robespierre

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Characters:

Age: All the characters, except for Prince Louis Capet, were in their mid-twenties or early thirties during the events portrayed. They should be played with the joyous energy and vital needs of children sure they could do everything so much better.

Gender and Race: Characters have their race or gender specified based on the needs of the character, not of the historical personage. Any characteristic not specified should be cast with an eye to maximizing diversity to reflect the (relative to the mores of its time) broadness of the revolutionary coalition. Gender should not be construed to mean biological sex, casting trans actors in accordance with their gender identity is encouraged.

Casting: In the vein of a Shakespearean tragedy, this play has a ludicrous number of parts to be played by the ensemble. It can be done with as few as 8 but would ideally feature 10-12. The actor playing Robespierre should be the only one not double cast.

The Revolutionaries

MAXIMILIEN ROBESPIERRE: Female. Any race. Brilliant, bold and incapable of compromise. Robespierre is awkward and speaks with a slightly archaic formality, but is capable of pouring rhetoric into the air with stunning power.

GEORGE DANTON: Female. African American. As brilliant as Robespierre but much more charming. An activist at ease with the people in a way Robespierre will never be.

CAMILLE DESMOULINS: Male. A person of color. Robespierre's friend from growing up and second in command. Loyal but cautious.

LOUIS SAINT-JUST: Female. Any race. A younger, less experienced version of Robespierre. Hopelessly devoted to Robespierre.

JOSEPH DELAUNAY: Male. White. A financier and Danton's second in command.

The Reactionaries

BARNAVE: Male. White. The president of the National Assembly and a moderate. Desperately to thread a middle ground between the despotism of the royals and the anarchy of the revolutionaries. A good person, but too confident.

KING LOUIS XVI: Male. Any race. A sweet, gentle ruler who is wildly out of his depth.

MARIE ANTOINETTE: Female. Any race. Strong willed and imperious. She firmly believes in the royal prerogative and has no problem enforcing it with deadly power.

PRINCE LOUIS CAPET: Any gender. Any race. Louis and Marie's son. An innocent.

The Sans Culottes

VERONIQUE: Female. A person of color. The most revolutionary of the trio.

AURELIA: Female. Any race. The most violent of the trio.

PIERRE: Male. Any race. The most hungry of the trio.

The ensemble will also be drawn on to play a variety of other characters.

Setting:

1791-1794 Paris

This play should take place on a flexible stage since the action ranges widely across Paris. There should be a raised area, preferably in the back, on which sit two massive thrones for Louis and Marie. There should be lots of room for mayhem.

Language and Tone:

There are many different types of language in this play. Unless otherwise specified, the characters speak in unaccented American prose. When characters speak in accents, their first few lines are written to reflect the accent, and the rest of their lines are written normally for ease of reading. Lines spoken by the Royals are in rhyming blank verse and formatted as such.

A Note on Theatrical Style:

This play is in five acts. It will quickly become clear that the first acts of this play ricochet between different styles like a sugar-high twelve-year-old. The goal is to disorient and delight, dropping the audience into the infinite possibilities of the French revolution. It should be performed like a cross between the best house party you've ever been to and a civil war.

Punctuation:

Punctuation follows speech patterns over grammatical convention. Additionally, the following punctuations have the following specific meanings:

A dash (—) indicates an interruption by either the speaker themselves or by a new speaker.

A slash (/) indicates the point of interruption if it is not at the end of the line.

An ellipsis (...) indicates a slow trailing off, either on purpose or accidental.

A dash-ellipsis (—...) signifies a sudden stop and then a silent continuation of thought.

Act 1

Scene 1

(Veronique, Aurelia and Pierre stumble out. They speak with terrible French accents and move with the clumsy grace of clowns.)

AURELIA

Bonjour, muzafuckas!

VERONIQUE

Welcome to ze revolution.

PIERRE

We are le Sans Culottes and we are here to explain what's going on.

AURELIA

Badly.

VERONIQUE

It all started with the king.

(Lights up on King Louis XVI.)

AURELIA

Fuck that guy.

(Lights down on the king)

PIERRE

His finances were, how you say, le shit.

VERONIQUE

People got so mad they started a revolution.

AURELIA

Vive la revolucion!

VERONIQUE

Which created the assembly. The first democratic legislature in all of Europe.

AURELIA

Except the aristocrats used their money to win all the seats.

PIERRE

Rich people ruin everything.

VERONIQUE

They appointed Antoine Barnave, a young moderate, as president.

(Lights up on Barnave.)

PIERRE

He is young.

AURELIA

Everyone is young. It's a revolution.

VERONIQUE

He still thinks like a useless old man.

BARNAVE

I'm just trying to stabilize France and avoid a civil war.

AURELIA

Shove it, douche goblin!

PIERRE

Boom, le sick burn.

(Lights down on Barnave.)

AURELIA

There is only one person in the whole assembly is not a goblin of le douche.

THE SANS CULOTTES

Maximillian Robespierre.

(Lights up on Robespierre)

AURELIA

Wait, you are Maximillian Robespierre, hero of the people?

ROBESPIERRE

Umm, yea?

AURELIA

Apologies. You do not look how I expected.

PIERRE

Must be the bangs.

VERONIQUE

Robespierre runs to Jacobins print shop and fights for us in the assembly while Danton and the Cordeliers organize in the streets.

(Lights up on Danton.)

PIERRE

I like Danton.

AURELIA
Everybody likes Danton.

DANTON
It's because I'm awesome.

PIERRE
Très awesome.

VERONIQUE
And these two revolutionaries have a secret weapon, the most important technological breakthrough in history: pamphlets.

AURELIA
Pamphlets that have riled up people like us.

PIERRE
Hungry people.

AURELIA
Angry people.

VERONIQUE
People who believe in the ideals of revolution.

PIERRE
Which is why the assembly is trying to shut down printing by the revolutionary clubs.

VERONIQUE
Shh. You are giving away the next scene.

PIERRE
Ridicule. Foreshadowing provides le suspense.

AURELIA
Allons-y. People have to get home and watch le Netflix.

VERONIQUE
Au revoir for now. We will be back when shit gets fun.

PIERRE
If anything is confusing in the meantime, drink more wine.

(They exit.)

Scene 2

(The Assembly. Figures in identical white wigs sit on spinning stools. Barnave sits on

a high stool, the boss. Robespierre sits apart, peeling and eating an orange. A roar of shouting. The bang of a gavel.)

MAN 1

Down with the clubs!

MAN 3

Crush the radicals!

BARNAVE

Order!

MAN 1

I heard the clubs are publishing writing by women.

MAN 2

If women start writing, they'll never get married.

MAN 3

They'll all become witches.

MAN 1

Their vaginas will fall out.

BARNAVE

Order! Order! We must discuss this bill rationally.

MAN 2

Can we rationally beat them to death?

BARNAVE

I know you are concerned about the protests, but the clubs are not our enemies. The Cordeliers, the Jacobin, these clubs are full of virtuous men.

MAN 4

Then why are we voting on a law to gag them?

BARNAVE

We do not have to demonize those we disagree with to recognize they are wrong. The revolution has been an enormous success. We have peace in France and compromise with the king. The Austrian army, once poised to attack, now sends envoys of friendship. It is time to beat our swords to ploughshares, time to retire the clubs and their wild writings. The revolution is over. The revolution is victorious.

MAN 1

Go Freedom!

MAN 2

Go France!

MAN 3

Fuck England!

BARNAVE

With the debate concluded, I call for a vote on—

ROBESPIERRE

Pardon me, but... what debate?

(Robespierre walks over to the wigs.)

I didn't hear a debate. I heard a speech. A perfectly pleasant speech. But only one.

MAN 2

How dare you bring counting into this?

MAN 4

Let Robespierre speak.

MAN 3

You would support this radical.

MAN 4

Well, you're dumb and ugly.

MAN 3

Ridiculous. I am not ugly.

ROBESPIERRE

Our constitution guarantees "liberty to every man to speak, write, print and publish his opinion." And now the legislature that guaranteed that freedom wants to ban it?

BARNAVE

If we don't establish order, the Austrian army will establish it for us.

ROBESPIERRE

So we should abandon our revolution because the Von Trapps are upset?

BARNAVE

These protests are a distraction that helps no one.

ROBESPIERRE

If you want people to stop protesting, maybe you should try listening to them.

MAN 3

Listening? What are we, some kind of democratically-elected representative body?

BARNAVE

I have been listening, Maximilien. I was listening last week, when Jean-Paul Marat wrote that "man has the right to deal with their oppressors by devouring their palpitating hearts." We cannot allow France to descend into violence.

ROBESPIERRE

Marat is one person. You seek to silence a thousand. I am the leader of the Jacobin, one of the clubs you plan to ban. Do I seem violent?

MAN 3

That hair is a war crime.

ROBESPIERRE

You want to silence us, not because we are violent, but because we are honest. Because we dare ask for fair taxes and the protection of human rights. Silencing us for criticizing this assembly is the kind of tyranny that caused our revolution in the first place.

MAN 1

I thought it was caused by disastrous fiscal management and a string of famines triggering a power struggle between the burgeoning capitalist class and the remnants of feudalism.

MAN 2

I thought it was caused by your ugly face.

MAN 3

Nice one!

ROBESPIERRE

Friends, President Barnave wants you to believe our revolution is over. But if you walk outside, you will see children begging on every corner. You will see good people breaking their backs so their children won't starve. You will see barons and bankers and landlords getting richer while everyone else suffers. Moderation may sound pleasant, but it means letting people starve. Letting the rich abuse their power because we are afraid of real change. Friends of France, now is not the time to give up on our dreams for the sake of false moderation. Now is the time to forge on, supported by the clubs, towards what our revolution promised. Now is the time to fight for Liberty, Equality, Fraternity.

(Robespierre starts chanting "Vive La Revolution," but nobody joins in. After two or three times, Robespierre realizes this and stops.)

BARNAVE

Thank you for sharing your opinions.

ROBESPIERRE

I'm not finished.

MAN 2

Nobody likes you.

BARNAVE

Unfortunately the bylaws prevent any member of the assembly from speaking too long.

We are a democracy after all. Is there anyone else who like to throw their lot in with this radical?

(The sound of crickets.)

MAN 4

I mean, I guess I could...

BARNAVE

Of course, Jean-Luc. The floor is yours. Though that will leave no one to speak for your appropriations bill this afternoon...

MAN 4

Oh. Huh.

BARNAVE

Anyone else?

MAN 3

I have more to say about women.

ROBESPIERRE

Cowards! Will none of you speak for the principles you swore to die for?

BARNAVE

Your ideals are admirable, of course, but you have to live in the real world. A world of allies and compromises. Until you learn how things work, you will be nothing but a useless upstart peasant.

(Robespierre rocks back, stunned by this statement)

All those in favor of restricting the publishing of radical clubs to prevent anarchy and avoid a devastating war with the Austrians, say aye.

ALL

Aye.

BARNAVE

All opposed.

ROBESPIERRE

You can't gag the people with a vote.

BARNAVE

No nays were heard. The resolution passes unanimously.

ROBESPIERRE

What? I did not—

BARNAVE

We are dismissed.

(All exit. Robespierre rushes Barnave.)

ROBESPIERRE

This is madness.

BARNAVE

This is government. If you can't even figure out how to vote properly, why are you here?

ROBESPIERRE

I am here to represent the people.

BARNAVE

We all are. Everyone in this assembly is here because they were elected.

ROBESPIERRE

There are barons who bought their seats because they thought it would be fun. Dukes who only ran to oppose real change. How many assemblymen are farmers? How many are bricklayers? The people have no voice here.

BARNAVE

You think because some nobles were evil, the people must be good. But being oppressed doesn't make people good, it only makes them oppressed. And as soon as they have power, they will become the same as the men who oppressed them.

(Barnave starts to exit.)

ROBESPIERRE

You cannot stop a revolution halfway.

BARNAVE

And you cannot ram it through on sheer force of will.

ROBESPIERRE

Watch me.

Scene 3

(The print shop of the Jacobins. It hums with energy as people rush to and fro. Machine sounds of the printing press fill the air.)

ROBESPIERRE

Press four's jammed.

VICTOR

I just fixed it.

ROBESPIERRE

Try resetting the chase bed. We can't afford a slowdown.

(Noticing press six is done)

Let's flip six to the afternoon paper. Where is Alexandre?

VICTOR

She passed out next to the ink. She's snoring so we're pretty sure she's not dead.

(Emile runs up with a stack of pamphlets.)

EMILE

Where do we send these ones?

ROBESPIERRE

Lyon. Marseilles. Toulouse. We need more support for the revolution outside Paris. Wait. Why do the pamphlets say, "Fight for the Relovution?"

EMILE

Shit.

ROBESPIERRE

I'm sorry, friend. We'll have to do it again.

VICTOR

That's six thousand pieces. We don't have time.

ROBESPIERRE

If we do not demand perfection in our words, how can we achieve perfection in our world?

VICTOR

Perfection is great in theory, but in practice it kinda sucks.

ROBESPIERRE

All the hardship, all the sacrifice, it will be worth it when we save France.

EMILE

I'll reprint.

VICTOR

Tyrant.

(Camille enters.)

ROBESPIERRE

Camille!

(They hug.)

CAMILLE

You know it's Saturday, right?

VICTOR

When we started, it was Friday.

CAMILLE

You've been here all night?

ROBESPIERRE

We don't know how long we have before Barnave shuts us down.

CAMILLE

Yea, Danton's Cordeliers were freaking out last night.

ROBESPIERRE

I'm sorry I couldn't stop the ban.

CAMILLE

Nobody blames you.

ROBESPIERRE

Maybe they should. I thought getting elected to the assembly would mean I could make real change, but Barnave blocks every proposal. It's so...

CAMILLE

How are you doing?

ROBESPIERRE

We're printing as much as we can before they shut us down.

CAMILLE

I meant, how are *you* doing.

ROBESPIERRE

Oh.

(Pause)

I'm fine.

CAMILLE

Max.

ROBESPIERRE

The revolution doesn't care if I'm exhausted.

CAMILLE

I do. Maybe Charlotte should come stay for a little while.

ROBESPIERRE

I do not need my sister taking care of me.

CAMILLE

You're allowed to rely on people.

ROBESPIERRE

I rely on France.

France isn't your friend.

CAMILLE

Of course it is.

ROBESPIERRE

France can't take care of you. It can't give you a hug when you're feeling overwhelmed and exhausted. You need real, human connection.

CAMILLE

That's...

ROBESPIERRE

(A small boy enters, running.)

BOY

We saw them. We saw them. I ran as fast as I could but the soldiers are coming for you.

ROBESPIERRE

(To Camille)
You have to get out.

CAMILLE

If you're staying, I'm staying.

ROBESPIERRE

I can't let them hurt you.

CAMILLE

You can't protect me from a king.

ROBESPIERRE

I can try. Please, Camille, you have to go. If you're here, I'll be too worried about protecting you to focus on what must be done.

CAMILLE

Which is what?

ROBESPIERRE

I don't know.

CAMILLE

Leaders have to know, Max.

ROBESPIERRE

I...

CAMILLE

I'll go to the Cordelier clubhouse. Maybe if we team up, the soldiers will back down.

Do not invite Marat.

ROBESPIERRE

I'm not insane.

CAMILLE

What do I do?

BOY

Find your family and stay safe.

ROBESPIERRE

That's not fair.

BOY

Your time will come, tiny revolutionary. Until then, let us make a better world for you to inherit.

ROBESPIERRE

(The boy hugs Robespierre.)

See, Camille? France can give me hugs. Now, both of you, run.

(Camille and the boy exit.)

Victor, pack up anything that's finished. We can't let them undo our work. Emile, take any extra plates to the basement. We might be able to save them if—

ROBESPIERRE

(A loud knock.)

Open the door, by order of the king.

SOLDIER 1 (O.S.)

Nobody's home.

EMILE

We've gone fishing.

VICTOR

I can hear your presses.

SOLDIER 1 (O.S.)

No presses. We're just common milliners, millining away.

EMILE

I thought you were fishermen.

SOLDIER 2 (O.S.)

We're multitalented.

EMILE

Open the door or we'll break it down.

SOLDIER 1 (O.S.)

(Robespierre opens the door. Two soldiers push into the room.)

Where is Maximilien Robespierre?

SOLDIER 1

In front of you.

ROBESPIERRE

You're the vicious radical setting Paris ablaze?

SOLDIER 2

People never recognize you, Max.

EMILE

Must be the bangs.

VICTOR

By order of the assembly, you are to shut down all Jacobin printing presses at once.

SOLDIER 1

Presses? These are couches.

EMILE

Really uncomfortable couches.

VICTOR

If you won't shut down, we'll rip your presses apart.

SOLDIER 1

ROBESPIERRE

I'm afraid I can't allow that.

(Soldier 1 pulls a sword on Robespierre.)

Is that supposed to scare us? We have lived through a France where half the people were serfs, enslaved to the land and beaten by cruel masters. We have lived through famines and wars, starved on the streets so nobles could stuff their faces. Do you think we're afraid to die to save our country?

VICTOR

Uh, I am.

EMILE

I have mixed feelings.

ROBESPIERRE

You guys, we're supposed to be revolutionaries, laying down our lives for our ideals.

VICTOR
What if my ideals involve not dying?

SOLDIER 1
Ha, I knew you revolutionaries were all talk.
(The soldier pushes Robespierre out of the way but suddenly we hear—)

DANTON (O.S.)
Vive la revolution!

(Danton enters.)
DANTON
Morning, gentlemen.

ROBESPIERRE
Danton, thank god. Where are the rest of the Cordeliers?

DANTON
Camille's looking for them. I was the only one at the clubhouse.

ROBESPIERRE
What?

DANTON
It's Saturday.

ROBESPIERRE
We're doomed.

DANTON
Not yet.
(Turning to the soldiers)
Friends, do you know who I am?

SOLDIER 1
The traitor Danton.

SOLDIER 2
The patriot Danton.

DANTON
(To Soldier 2)
Good. If you ever get sick of being a royalist bastard, you could be a revolutionary guard.

SOLDIER 2
Really?

DANTON

But enough about you, let's talk about me. See, I ran here through the streets shouting "Vive La Revolution!" And there just so happen to be a lot of people these days in the mood to take a stand against tyranny. People who know to spread the word. So now that I've stalled for a bit...

(Bellowing)

Vive la Revolution!

(Outside, a roar of "Vive la Revolution!" answers.)

How big of a mob do you think it would take to rip you to shreds?

SOLDIER 1

That's... You... This...

(Soldier 1 exits in a huff. Soldier 2 dawdles for a moment.)

SOLDIER 2

Can I pick up an application for the revolutionary guard?

(Emile hands over an application.)

EMILE

Ignore the typo.

(Soldier 2 exits. Emile turns to Danton.)

You are so hot.

ROBESPIERRE

Thank you, Danton. Your assistance was invaluable.

DANTON

No worries. You would do the same for me.

EMILE

Max couldn't do that.

VICTOR

We're not even allowed to carry weapons.

ROBESPIERRE

We should get back to printing.

DANTON

Do you ever take a break?

ROBESPIERRE

I will take a break when France is free. Now, if you could calm the people outside...

DANTON

If the mob does a bit of damage, it might teach them not to mess with us.

ROBESPIERRE

No. No violence on my account.

DANTON

You know those guards would've sliced you in half if they had a chance.

ROBESPIERRE

Other people's corruption does not justify abandoning my morality.

DANTON

Fine. I'll go lead them a couple turns around the palace shouting nasty things. Scaring the pants off some fancy royals should satisfy them.

ROBESPIERRE

Are you sure you can keep them from...?

DANTON

These are my people. They'll keep it verbal if I say so.

ROBESPIERRE

Thank you. For all you do for France.

DANTON

For France.

(They clasp hands. Danton exits. Pause, then Robespierre turns to Victor and Emile.)

ROBESPIERRE

Back to work.

VICTOR

Why can't you be cool?

Scene 4

(A trumpet. King Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette enter in resplendent finery, followed by guards and advisors. The royal couple walks to their gilded thrones. The advisors kneel in deference.)

KING LOUIS XVI

O'ergrown with weeds to choke our people's breath
France runs to seed, and faces certain death
Unless we few who art assembled here
Can halt our land's descent to rage and fear.
Your wisdoms then must guide us through the squall.

(The king sits. The men rise.)

Come Charles, report the news that doth befall.

CHARLES

Your majesty, the protests continue. The famines that started this vile revolution are growing worse. And, so far today, six peasants have died in the street from starvation.

(A man whispers something in his ear.)

Sorry. Seven peasants.

KING LOUIS XVI

Each death we feel, as 'twere our life we lose.
Come Barnave, do present us better news,
Your great assembly must make well our bruise.

BARNAVE

The ban on printing from the clubs went through unanimously yesterday. Soldiers are enforcing it as we speak and I have no doubt that will be the last we hear from Robespierre and these protestors.

MARIE ANTOINETTE

That vicious troll, why list these fools to one
Whose life is not worth e'en a penny's sum?

BARNAVE

It's the damn Enlightenment. That idiot Voltaire told everybody to think for themselves, and now all the rules have been tossed into the fire of revolution.

MARIE ANTOINETTE

That fire must be quenched with coldest steel.
Duke Brunswick's troops would bring these dogs to heel.

BARNAVE

Your majesties agreed to leave the Austrians out of it. An invasion would be a bloodbath. We must choose peace over madness.

MARIE ANTOINETTE

You call me mad?

(To Louis)

Didst thou hear what he said?

(Back to Barnave)

We'll see how proud you are without your head.

KING LOUIS XVI

Our fragile France hath felt too many galls,
No further fights within our chamber walls.

(Charles steps forward.)

CHARLES

Apologies. Nine peasants.

(Prince Louis, only six years old, enters.)

PRINCE LOUIS

Oh Mother, mother, did you hear the crowd?
Outside my window they did chant so loud.

KING LOUIS XVI

(To Barnave)

What? Have these protests grown so wild
That in their mayhem they abuse a child?

PRINCE LOUIS

They did not so, dear father, they did sing
Strange songs of how they would behead the king.
Forsoothe, I think beheading would be grand.
My pate could then adventure through the land,
Whilst time my body stayed behind in school.

MARIE ANTOINETTE

Oh dearest boy, my guileless guiltless fool.

KING LOUIS XVI

He hath not learned of death, our little one.

MARIE ANTOINETTE

Preserve him then. Willst not protect thy son?

(A whisper in Charles' ear.)

CHARLES

I'm told the mob is being led by the radical George Danton. They seem to be upset about the failed attempts to shut down the Jacobin presses.

BARNAVE

Failed? What do you mean failed?

KING LOUIS XVI

My child, with Charles go, to move your bed.
In inner room shall you reside instead.

PRINCE LOUIS

But if my room must move, what of my toys?
They shall be scared, alone, of such harsh noise.

KING LOUIS XVI

Brave child to think on subjects royally.

MARIE ANTOINETTE

Dear boy, this world cannot but spoil thee.

CHARLES

Not to worry, my lord. We'll collect your toys and bring them with us.

(Charles and Prince Louis start to exit. Charles turns back.)

Fourteen peasants.

MARIE ANTOINETTE

Is this the mob that you took care of, fool?

Your weakness doth but fortify misrule.

KING LOUIS

The rabble now affrights my son with chants,

We cannot lose control of our fair France.

Perhaps, Barnave, my wife is in the right

That our grave problems must be solved by might

BARNAVE

They won't be solved, they'll only get worse. Kings can't do whatever they want anymore. I can handle the protests. I can handle Robespierre. If I have your support.

KING LOUIS XVI

We shall consider all you have to say.

Tomorrow suits, for present time, good day.

(Barnave exits with the advisors.)

MARIE ANTOINETTE

Your France grows ever yet more menacing.

Our soldiers we must start assembling;

To join with Brunswick, armed just past the Rhone

With Austrian troupes to help restore your throne.

KING LOUIS XVI

Is't kingly then to take my subjects' lives?

To butcher France with civil war's sharp knives?

Rip fathers from their sons, tear men from wives?

MARIE ANTOINETTE

When I was shipped to France to be your bride,

Upon the winding road each night I cried

In fear my king would be a beast most vile,

But when I saw your sweet and gentle smile

Then all my fears did instantly depart.

Yet though I do so love thy gentle heart,

I wish the fates had matched me with a man

Far worse than what I feared when I began:

A monstrous brute, with fists like heavy stones.

For happily would I crack my fragile bones
To have a husband who would rule as king
And not like you, a pale and useless thing.

KING LOUIS XVI

Speak not so rash, your words will make me sick.
Your cruel-edged tongue doth cut me to the quick.

MARIE ANTOINETTE

The quicker then must you now take a stand
And not sit by to die by peasant's hand.

KING LOUIS XVI

Barnave hath failed, his way destruction lies
Yet, if we take up arms our country dies.
Both paths do lead to violence most assured,
Then we abjure them both and chose a third.
When choice is wrong, then not to choose is right.
We shall escape, amidst the dark of night
And save our country, and ourselves, by flight.

Scene 5

*(The printing room. Robespierre paces.
Camille watches.)*

CAMILLE

What if you build up a coalition?

ROBESPIERRE

Everyone in the assembly hates me. And it's just a matter of time before the soldiers get reinforcements and come back to finish the job.

CAMILLE

We'll figure something out.

ROBESPIERRE

If they shut down the club presses, the revolution will crumble to dust and the nobles drag the peasants back to slavery by their necks.

CAMILLE

When was the last time you ate?

ROBESPIERRE

That's... That's not important.

CAMILLE

You can't fight starvation if you don't eat. You have to take care of yourself.

ROBESPIERRE

I'll have some bread.

CAMILLE

We'll figure this out Max. We always do. Remember when you stopped those bullies in third grade?

ROBESPIERRE

Those bullies didn't have guns.

CAMILLE

We have justice. We have the hearts and minds of the people.

ROBESPIERRE

Their minds maybe. Danton has their hearts.

CAMILLE

Pretty incredible, right? It's even more impressive in front of a crowd.

ROBESPIERRE

Impressive enough to nearly start a riot.

CAMILLE

But you said Danton calmed them.

ROBESPIERRE

Maybe they're right to want a riot. Maybe nonviolence is a luxury we can't afford.

CAMILLE

Don't think like that. We can have both peace and equality. That's the point of utopia.

ROBESPIERRE

Watching the way Danton was with the soldiers, with my Jacobins. People naturally follow that kind of leadership. If I could be like that, maybe I could get people to listen.

CAMILLE

People do listen. You're the leader of the revolution.

ROBESPIERRE

And even my staff think I'm lame. People follow me because they agree with my ideas, but don't want the work of doing it themselves. I'm the tip of the spear; the blade follows while the tip does all the work. Danton makes revolution sound fun. I make it sound like a complex set of policy corrections.

CAMILLE

That's not... Okay maybe the policy thing is true. But you can be fun.

ROBESPIERRE

Really?

CAMILLE

There was that time with the river and you... Wait, nope, that was Charlotte. Wow, you really are lame.

(They share a smile. A commotion outside.)

ROBESPIERRE

Run Camille!

(A loud knocking.)

DANTON

Let me in, you useless shits.

CAMILLE

Danton?

(Camille rushes to open the door. Danton nearly falls through.)

What are you doing here? Are you alright?

DANTON

Alright? Alright? The world has changed forever and you ask if I'm alright?

ROBESPIERRE

What are you talking about?

DANTON

The king was found fleeing the country.

ROBESPIERRE

What? When?

DANTON

Last night. Apparently, his whole family disguised themselves as servants. Son of a bitch woulda made it out of France, but a hotel keeper in Varennes recognized his face from the money he used.

ROBESPIERRE

Barnave must be furious. This undermines everything.

DANTON

He's ordered them "escorted" back to the palace by the army. The city is on the verge of boiling over. The sans culottes want to riot.

ROBESPIERRE

This is it. Proof that moderation has failed. Proof that real revolution is the only way. Everyone will see the truth now. Everything will be different.

DANTON

Fuck yea.

Act 2

Scene 1

(The legislature again, complete with silly wigs and silly stools and silly people.)

Nothing is different.

BARNAVE

What?

ROBESPIERRE

But the king...

MAN 4

The king went on a short trip.

BARNAVE

A stroll.

MAN 1

A jaunt.

MAN 2

A petite private parade.

MAN 3

The king colluded with another country to slaughter his own people.

ROBESPIERRE

His majesty was not planning any sort of invasion.

BARNAVE

Then why flee to Austria?

ROBESPIERRE

Perhaps the king was craving wiener schnitzel.

MAN 1

He was craving treason!

ROBESPIERRE

(The assembly erupts in shouting.)

Order! There is enough unrest in the streets without bringing it into our assembly.

BARNAVE

If our assembly does not reflect the streets, what is it good for?

ROBESPIERRE

BARNAVE

We are balanced on a precipice. The people are angry, they want to lash out. And while I can admit that, perhaps, mistakes were made...

ROBESPIERRE

Mistakes? Did the King trip and fall a hundred and fifty miles?

BARNAVE

Reason and moderation must prevail.

MAN 4

If we do nothing, the people will riot.

BARNAVE

We will not do nothing. We will calm the mob and bring order to France. Once order is restored, we can perhaps discuss some of your proposals.

ROBESPIERRE

Once order is restored, you will insist change is no longer necessary.

MAN 3

What an excellent idea.

ROBESPIERRE

You demand moderation and then take advantage of it.

BARNAVE

And what do you propose? A riot?

ROBESPIERRE

I propose real policy changes. I propose a maximum price on bread, antipoverty programs in the countryside, and actually taxing the aristocrats instead of letting them buy their way out of contributing to the country. I propose that if the king won't do what it takes to protect the people, then strip the king of power and let the people to lead.

BARNAVE

People like the mob you sent marching on the castle? The mob that nearly ripped French soldiers to shreds?

ROBESPIERRE

I am the one who insisted they not hurt anyone. I am the reason no one was harmed.

BARNAVE

So you agree that violence is wrong. That we must reject wild dogs like Marat and commit to peaceful solutions.

ROBESPIERRE

Of course, but—

MAN 3
Problem solved!

MAN 1
Peace reigns!

MAN 2
Nothing changes!

MAN 3
President Barnave, now that we've settled this matter, can we turn to addressing true injustice? I was kicked off the ways and means committee.

ROBESPIERRE
This is why there are people on the street. This is why they listen to the bellowing of madmen like Marat. When you give people no other way forward, why are you surprised they consider violence?

BARNAVE
We are doing what we can within the system.

ROBESPIERRE
The system has a king feasting at his palace after abandoning his starving people. The system has ten percent of people with sixty percent of the money. Doing what we can is not enough when the people are suffocating under the weight of oppression.

MAN 2
I suffocated under the weight of your mom last night.

MAN 3
Well debated, Frederique!

(They high five.)

MAN 4
You're both nincompoops.

MAN 2
Well your mom pooped on my nincom last night.

(Man 2 goes for another high five.)

MAN 1
Eww.

MAN 2
Don't yuck my yum.

ROBESPIERRE
You can't possible think this idiocy is helping France, President Barnave.

MAN 2

Your mom's idiocy was—

ROBESPIERRE

Shut up, you useless sack of pompous dog-shit.

(Pause. Nobody was expecting that.)

BARNAVE

Careful now. That temper of yours will get you in trouble.

ROBESPIERRE

The people demand real progress. I won't allow to you destroy that with political games.

BARNAVE

I am sick of hearing what you will allow. You have no idea how hard it is to run a country. You are nothing but a peasant on a power trip.

ROBESPIERRE

The people of France will be heard.

BARNAVE

The people of France never fucking shut up. Them, I have to listen to. You I do not. This meeting is adjourned. Go pester someone else.

MAN 2

Dickhead.

Scene 2

(Robespierre paces in front of Danton and Camille.)

ROBESPIERRE

That, that, that... asshole.

DANTON

If they want a fight, let's give them one.

CAMILLE

We have to be careful. One wrong move could trigger an explosion.

DANTON

What's so bad about that? You tried the assembly. You tried publishing. Maybe it's time to try something that works.

ROBESPIERRE

The people—

DANTON

The people want to be told who to fight. Trust me, I'm the one out there organizing them. If you don't give them what they want, they'll pass you by. Marat offers plenty of targets.

CAMILLE

Marat's an overgrown baby shitting diapers for the fun of watching other people clean it up.

DANTON

Marat's a goddamn hobgoblin, but at least he's got a plan.

ROBESPIERRE

I have a plan. The assembly just won't listen.

DANTON

Everybody listens to the knife at their neck.

CAMILLE

They're not listening to the words. They're listening to the knife.

DANTON

Still listening.

ROBESPIERRE

We can't just...

DANTON

The king betrayed the people. This is our moment. There will never be a better time for change, but it's slipping through your grasp because you're afraid of clutching too hard. What's so bad about a little violence?

CAMILLE

The part where it's killing people.

ROBESPIERRE

Violence is too hard to control. Once you start, where do you stop? If you kill one person, there's no reason not to kill two. The only safe, rational line is before the first death.

DANTON

Did we start a revolution for the safe, rational line? You want perfection? You want utopia? Maybe violence is the cost.

CAMILLE

So we destroy our souls to save France?

ROBESPIERRE

A sacrifice...

CAMILLE

You can't sacrifice your humanity to make France more humane.

DANTON

If someone took Camille. Was going to kill your best friend. Would do whatever it took you stop them?

ROBESPIERRE

Of course.

DANTON

Is the revolution less important than one friend?

(The question hangs in the air. A knock.)

ROBESPIERRE

Who's that?

DANTON

I asked my friend to keep an eye out in case anything goes down. Guess it's going down.

(Robespierre answers the door. Joseph enters.)

JOSEPH

Joseph Delaunay, big fan. Thank you for standing up to the assembly.

ROBESPIERRE

I... I am happy to serve.

CAMILLE

You have fans now?

DANTON

What's the word?

JOSEPH

The protests are growing. They feel different. Scary. Barnave's even got the assembly out trying to control the crowds. One of them got punched in the face.

ROBESPIERRE

(Laughing)

Someone punched an assemblyman in the face?

DANTON

I told you violence could be good.

JOSEPH

People are gathering around the castle. Last time a group like that formed...

ROBESPIERRE

They stormed the Bastille.

DANTON

We gotta get out there.

CAMILLE

Are we going to stop the violence or make it worse?

(Pause.)

ROBESPIERRE

I... I don't know.

Scene 3

(The Sans Culottes enter, drunk and spoiling for a fight.)

AURELIA, PIERRE & VERONIQUE

Well ze king's a bore,
And his wife's a whore,
Zose twits aren't ze boss of us anymore.
Cuz ze traitors fled,
And ze monarchy's dead.
So we'll cut off zeir heads, just to be sure.

PIERRE

Just to be surrrrrrrre!

VERONIQUE

(To the audience)
Told you we would be back.

*(They laugh, swigging from wine bottles.
Barnave enters with a megaphone.)*

BARNAVE

People of France. Return to your homes.

VERONIQUE

Who is zis turd dumpling?

BARNAVE

I am your president. Thank you for coming out to express your opinions. I assure you that the assembly will represent your concerns to the king.

AURELIA

Fuck the king.

VERONIQUE

Fuck the assembly.

PIERRE

Fuck kumquats.

ALL

What?

PIERRE

Those tiny oranges. Are you supposed to peel them? Eat them whole? Juice them in a tiny orange juicer? C'est impossible.

(Robespierre enters with Joseph, Danton and Camille.)

BARNAVE

Thank god you're here. Make these vagrants go home before the Austrians hear of this madness.

ROBESPIERRE

I told you, if you blocked revolution in the assembly, it would spill into the streets.

BARNAVE

They are spilling into the abyss. These fools would hang every soul in France who disagrees with them.

ROBESPIERRE

You cannot frighten us with lies and propaganda.

AURELIA

Actually, that is pretty much the plan.

BARNAVE

These are the people you think so wise. Men who would butcher a king.

VERONIQUE

So what? He would butcher us.

BARNAVE

That's... That's different.

PIERRE

Because you think we are worthless. You think we are trash because we do not follow your shitty rules that oppress us.

AURELIA

Ooh la la, Pierre. Zat was some insightful analysis.

PIERRE

Merci.

BARNAVE

If we do not establish order, the Austrian army will descend on Paris.

PIERRE

What are they going to do, kangaroo us to death?

VERONIQUE

I think that is Australian.

AURELIA

I take back my compliment.

PIERRE

Well they are still stupid fart-sniffers who chew their mothers' toenail clippings.

(The blast of a trumpet.)

BARNAVE

You shouldn't have talked about their mother's toenails.

(Brunswick enters, a dashing commander in a dashing commander's dashing commander hat. Brunswick speaks with a thick German accent.)

BRUNSWICK

Ein manifesto from The Duke of Brunswick, commander of the combined troops of the Austrian Emperor and the king of Prussia.

VERONIQUE

Why do you have that dumb German accent?

PIERRE

Oui. This is France. You should speak with un dumb French accent.

BRUNSWICK

Brunswick is in Prussia.

PIERRE

Dosvedanya.

BRUNSWICK

That's Russia, you nincompoop.

VERONIQUE

Ha. Your geography is mediocre.

PIERRE

Shut up, douche gobbler.

VERONIQUE

Make me, dick cheese.

BRUNSWICK

Schweigensie, schreckliche Bauern!

(Silence. Brunswick smiles.)

Danke. France and all its inhabitants shall submit at once to the king, and assure royal inviolability and respect or we will inflict an ever-memorable vengeance by delivering the city of Paris to military execution and complete destruction. Sincerely, the motherfucking Duke of motherfucking Brunswick.

(Pause as they all consider this threat.)

PIERRE

Well, that escalated quickly.

(Brunswick exits.)

BARNAVE

Send these fools home before they destroy the country you claim to love.

ROBESPIERRE

Will you stop blocking revolution in the assembly?

BARNAVE

Are you insane? You can't negotiate in the face of ten thousand armed men.

JOSEPH

Ten thousand?

ROBESPIERRE

What choice do we have? We played by the rules. We tried debates and protests and publishing the truth. You shut us down.

BARNAVE

Because the Austrians will invade.

ROBESPIERRE

Exactly. You claim to disdain violence, but it's clearly the only thing you respect. As long as you fear Austria more than your own people, nothing will ever get done.

BARNAVE

So you'll push France into chaos because I won't give in to your stubbornness?

(Pause. Robespierre turns out to the audience.)

ROBESPIERRE

What do I do?

VERONIQUE

Umm, pardon, but you cannot talk to ze audience.

PIERRE

Oui. Zat is our job.

ROBESPIERRE

Do I give up on saving the world when we're so close? Or do I hold my nose and...? It's my call. Leaders know what to do. I have to know.

(Pause)

AURELIA

Are you done?

(He nods. He turns back to Barnave.)

BARNAVE

Well? Will you send your hooligans home so I can bring order to our country?

ROBESPIERRE

No. No more oppression in the name of order.

BARNAVE

You ...

ROBESPIERRE

We cannot turn back when we are so close. We cannot abandon utopia.

DANTON

That's what I'm talking about.

CAMILLE

People will die, Max.

ROBESPIERRE

Better to die for something than live for nothing.

BARNAVE

When France is aflame, covered in rotting corpses, remember this moment when you could have chosen moderation. You are responsible for what comes now.

(Pause.)

ROBESPIERRE

I know.

(Barnave exits.)

DANTON

You want me to give a speech? Set 'em off?

ROBESPIERRE

No. This is my decision, I have to stand behind it.

(Turning to the Sans Culottes)

Friends, these Austrian soldiers and the false king they defend, they seek to terrify us. To make us despair. They will not succeed. We have been afraid for a thousand years. We have behaved and been beaten for behaving. We have been trod upon by those who claim to know what is good for us. No more. We are the people, and we are done being told what to do.

AURELIA

Fuck yea.

ROBESPIERRE

Today, we stop playing by their rules. Today, we refuse to accept half measures and broken promises. Today, we riot.

AURELIA

Yes!

CAMILLE

Are you sure this is...

ROBESPIERRE

Riot. Riot.

AURELIA

Riot. Riot.

SANS CULOTTES

Riot. Riot.

ALL

(Chanting.)

Riot. Riot. Riot. Riot. Riot. Riot.

(The ensemble enters from all directions, joining the chant, growing louder. Then, suddenly, it stops.)

ROBESPIERRE

Tyranny ends now!

(Music blasts, something like DMX's "Where the Hood At." It's fast, loud and pissed the fuck off. This is riot music.)

(What follows should be beautiful chaos, the full expression of years of rage, starvation, and fear. This can take a long time; hundreds of years of oppression are being purged. At some point during this chaos, Louis enters.)

KING LOUIS

Dear Barnave, what hath so provoked French might
That storms do rage to very Heaven's height?

BARNAVE

You need to hide, your majesty.

KING LOUIS

What hole could hide us from this vicious fight?

BARNAVE

Prison. It's the only place they won't look. Go now.

KING LOUIS

Fair France, I pray that you survive this night.

*(The storm builds in intensity. Movements
that were balletic become jagged, violent.
Two soldiers run on stage. The music halts.)*

SOLDIERS

Stop or we shoot!

*(Silence. Then the ensemble coalesces into a
seething, dangerous mass.)*

ROBESPIERRE

There are two of you and thousands of us.

ENSEMBLE

(Softly)
Riot. Riot.

SOLDIER 2

We're just doing our job.

ROBESPIERRE

Your job is oppression. Join us and stand with the people.

ENSEMBLE

Riot. Riot.

SOLDIER 1

Get back. You've been warned.

ROBESPIERRE

Please. We don't want to hurt you.

ENSEMBLE

Riot. Riot.

We said get back.

SOLDIER 2

Riot. Riot.

ENSEMBLE

Get back or die!

SOLDIER 1

Vive la France!

AURELIA

(The ensemble surges forward but is stopped by the crack of gunfire. Aurelia falls. Silence as everyone stares at the body.)

Crush them!

DANTON

(The ensemble tears the guards apart. They rush off stage. Robespierre bends down by Aurelia. Danton runs back on.)

What are you doing? The people need us to lead.

DANTON

She's dead. Because I chose this.

ROBESPIERRE

You chose what was best for France. So did she.

DANTON

You worked with her, right? In your organizing.

ROBESPIERRE

We actually grew up in the same neighborhood.

DANTON

What was her name?

ROBESPIERRE

Aurelia. Aurelia Lemarc.

DANTON

Aurelia Lemarc.
(To the body)

Thank you for your sacrifice. It will not be in vain.

ROBESPIERRE

(Robespierre stands.)

For Aurelia Lemarc.

ROBESPIERRE

Fuck yea.

DANTON

(They grasp forearms. The crashing sound of doors collapsing inward.)

Scene 4

(Aurelia's body lies on the stage. After a while, Pierre enters with wine and walks over to Aurelia to offer a bottle. Pause. Pierre pokes Aurelia with his foot.)

Aurelia. I got you le wine. Aurelia.

PIERRE

(Veronique enters with loot from the palace.)

Pierre?

VERONIQUE

She will not get up. She must be drunk.

PIERRE

She was shot. She is... la morte.

VERONIQUE

Impossible. Death does not happen to us. Death happens to le bad guys.

PIERRE

I am sorry.

VERONIQUE

Non. Aurelia cannot be dead. Aurelia. Wake up, Aurelia.

PIERRE

Pierre.

VERONIQUE

Non. Non. Make her not dead.

PIERRE

I cannot.

VERONIQUE

PIERRE

Make her not dead. Make her not dead. Make her not dead.

*(Pierre collapses, weeping, on the body.
Veronique bends down and holds Pierre as
he cries. They lie there, a clown pieta.)*

(Barnave enters.)

BARNAVE

The castle was taken in minutes. His majesty, King Louis XVI, ordered the guards to stand down and committed his family to the relative safety of prison.

The few mansions still unguarded were looted. The crowds stole what they could carry and lit the rest on fire while chanting about freedom. They ransacked bakeries and hung the bakers from lampposts. In Saltpetriere, forty prostitutes were raped and butchered, for the revolution. In Bicetre, they killed forty-three teenage boys, some as young as twelve. A few people spoke out, but they were ignored. And the killing went on.

After four days, the dust settled and fourteen hundred people were dead. Fourteen hundred human beings. Sanitation workers carted away bodies and scrubbed blood from the streets with vinegar until only the hint of red remained. Everything went back to normal. France was “saved.”

To read the rest of this play or inquire about performance rights, please reach out to Jacob Marx Rice at jacob.marx.rice@gmail.com