

THE UNACCOMPLISHED DREAM

A play by Maria-Elena Pickett

List of Characters

Historical:

Robespierre

Barère, Robespierre's colleague at the Committee of Public Safety

Billaud, Robespierre's colleague at the Committee of Public Safety

Collot, Robespierre's colleague at the Committee of Public Safety

Eleonore Duplay, eldest daughter in the house where Robespierre lodged

Mrs Stephen, English woman supporter of the Revolution

Madame Chalabre, open admirer of Robespierre

Fictional:

Author

Two Assistants

A woman, who does not speak

A man, who does not speak

**Historical characters come to life when the Author visits them on stage
and imagination, fairy tales and history blend to create the play.**

ACT ONE

Scene 1

Lights on

On stage to the left of the audience a wooden bench where three people sit: a man reading a newspaper at one end, a woman dressed up in black at the other, and the Author in the middle. There is a counter to the right with two assistants standing behind it.

Assistant 1

And then do you know what she said?

Assistant 2

What?

Assistant 1

That she would go to the authorities and expose the case!

Assistant 2

As if they would give a damn

Assistant 1

That's exactly what I told her.

Exit Assistant 2

Assistant 1

Next!

Author gets up and walks to the counter. She's carrying a notebook and a pen.

Your name

Author

MEP

Assistant 1

Profession

Author

Author

Assistant 1

(Scrutinising Author) Author of what?

Author

Of this play

Assistant 1

(Shrugs his shoulders, then looks at the notebook and pen) You can't take those in.

Author

I need them for my job.

Assistant 1

(Takes out a large card from under the counter) They are in the list of forbidden items. Look! (Author leaves her notebook and pen on the counter and the Assistant quickly puts them away) Who do you want to see?

Author

Maximilien Robespierre

Assistant 1

Spell the surname

Author

R-O-B-E-S-P-I-E-R-R-E

Assistant 1

Room 135,796 – go in and turn left.

Lights off

Scene 2

A table and two chairs on centre stage.

Author walks in from the left and simultaneously Barère walks in from the right.

Barère

Good morning. I believe you wanted to see me.

Author

I'm afraid there's been a mistake. It wasn't actually you I came to see.

Barère

Nothing uncommon, my dear, please don't worry. They've recently been sending us visitors who want to see Roman emperors. They've obviously jumbled up the room numbers. But I'm sure I can be of help. Is it Nero or Tiberius you've come to see? They are the most popular these days, although Caligula is making a comeback.

Author

I don't want to see any Roman emperor. I've come to see Maximilien Robespierre.

Barère

(Visibly surprised) Ah! Well, in that case you're not far off the mark. Let me introduce myself

Author

There's no need. You're Bertrand Barère.

Barère

Indeed. You know me?

Author

I've recognised you from your portraits.

Barère

And whom do I have the pleasure to address?

Author

I'm the Author of this play.

Barère

I see. How delightful! Very pleased to make your acquaintance. Please sit down. I'm sorry I can't offer you anything more comfortable. It's always been like this here – the nature of the place, I suppose.

The Author sits down at the table.

Author

I wasn't expecting to meet you, but now that I have, I wonder, would you be able to help me?

Barère

Yes, certainly, with great pleasure. Do you want me to fetch Maximilian for you now?

Author

I'd rather have a word with you first if possible.

Barère

(Sitting down) I'd be delighted. It's such a rare occasion to have an author in our midst. What is it you'd like to discuss with me? Anything specific?

Author

There's a question that keeps nagging me and perhaps you'll have the answer or at least your answer: Why did it all go so wrong for Maximilien in the end?

Barère

Is that what you're here to find? Has no one in all this time been able to come out with a plausible answer in that world that was once mine and now is yours?

Author

They've come out with a great many answers, believe me.

Barère

But you've found them inadequate.

Author

Exactly. How could a man who had so much going for him, who was at the top of his power, succumb as he did?

Barère

Yes, yes, it was something of a tragedy, wasn't it? Poor Maximilien!

Author

What do you mean "something" of a tragedy? Why not consider it a fully-blown tragedy? Surely it was such for him.

Barère

Of course, for him it was different but perhaps not a tragedy in the sense I was talking about.

Author

I don't quite understand.

Barère

If I'm not much mistaken, for Maximilien his was a tragedy in the classical sense, in the grand sense – he was very much given to quote the classics that I've no doubt he knew very well. So his idea of a tragedy was not a regrettable thing, but even something to be aimed at. That's the way he was.

Author

But for you a tragedy is not a regrettable thing, is that what you mean?

Barère

Yes, I'm very far from pretending to be a hero, so for me a tragedy is something to avoid if you can. But at the time we're talking about I could not dwell on this kind of niceties. I was fighting for my life. We all were.

Author

Was Maximilien also fighting for his life?

Barère

Yes, although because of the way he was, I don't believe he cared much about what happened to him in the end. We all attempted to say so much in our speeches - to die for liberty, for our country, etc. - but when it came to the moment of truth, he was probably the only one who truly meant it - perhaps Saint-Just as well, who knows? He was a difficult character, that one. I never cared much for him, to tell you the truth. He and Maximilian were apparently friends and shared many ideals, but you can't compare the two. Maximilian could be the most annoying of individuals - anyone was aware of it - but he had many other traits we admired and his popularity, ah! that was incredible. The people adored him. You had to have been there to understand what I mean. While Saint-Just, well, I suppose he was young. He thought he knew it all. And then, he had no sense of humour. Perhaps that's why he's not around any more... Who knows?

Author

Are you implying that Maximilian had a sense of humour?

Barère

Oh yes.

Author

Really?

Barère

There were two sides to him: the public and the private man. I was fortunate to get to know both - most of the others never did.

Author

Why didn't you try to help him or at least to avoid his arrest?

Barère

I did. I certainly did. No one can blame me for not trying. Right up to the end I was striving as hard as I could to defuse the situation, but it got terribly out of hand. There were too many people bent on destroying him.

Author

Why do you think was that?

Barère

I'm no historian. I can't give you a clear picture of why things were the way they were. However, if you'd like the shortest of replies to the question "why", I can tell you: Maximilian had many good qualities and a few undesirable ones, but in the end what caused his fall was his lack of tact - as simple as that. When it came to dealing with individuals he had no tact at all.

Author

You should know. Posterity remembers you as the greatest of diplomats.

Barère

Yes, I'm a tactful person and feel fortunate to be so. You see, you either are or are not. In Maximilian case it was a great pity - tact would have taken him much further. I once told him so. Yes, after one of our stormy committee meetings. We were left alone in the room and I couldn't contain myself. I thought that the whole situation had been exacerbated pointlessly and that a little tact from him would have given him the results he wanted.

Author

What did he say?

Barère

He smiled. I think he agreed with me, but - as I said - couldn't do anything about it. A tactful Maximilian would have been so much out of character, unbelievably so.

Author

So, in the end, there was no other way out?

Barère

Not really, because he wasn't only tactless but also indecisive.

Author

If that was the case, which of the two would you say contributed most to his downfall? Lack of tact or indecisiveness?

Barère

In the long term, being tactless had the effect of alienating him from those whose support he needed most in government, but being indecisive was probably the final straw, what took him directly to the guillotine.

Author

Why do you think this was so?

Barère

I'm not totally sure myself because I wasn't there when after being arrested his friends apparently persuaded him to take control of Paris while there was still time and the Commune was on his side. However, he seemed to dither and the Convention took the opportunity to strike him down. Even if I'm not sure whether this actually happened or not, it would not be out of character - he used to dither a lot.

Author

Would his refusal be interpreted as his dislike to become a dictator?

Barère

That might well be so. He was a man of the law, you see. I know that most of us were lawyers and yet he was the only one amongst us to go to great lengths to adhere to the letter of the law and try to find legal justification in every action. I think he was afraid of chaos as much as of dictatorship.

Author

Wasn't the Revolution chaos after all?

Barère

That's why perhaps he strived most than anyone else to give it sense. They said the Revolution spoke through him. That's probably what they meant.

Author

He was a complex individual.

Barère

We are all complex, one way or another. He had much going for him.

Author

Did he lack ambition, you think?

Barère

Maybe - I would not call him an ambitious man, although many did.

Author

You imputed him with attempting to marry the king's sister.

Barère

Personally I didn't. It was someone else's idea - Vadier's perhaps? I can't remember.

We were all trying to save our skins and it was not surprising that we would come up with crazy ideas. You see, you must understand that it wasn't easy to blame

Maximilien for any ordinary wrongdoing. The man was well known for never doing anything wrong! He had no vices, he was the most frugal man on earth, no one knew him commit any misdemeanour What can you do with a man like that? We were all desperate by then. I was shocked to see Maximilien arrested in that way. The possibility had always been there, but I just couldn't believe it when it happened. And I don't think I was the only one to feel that way.

Author

Did the fact that Maximilien failed to spell out the names of those he thought were behind the latest plot what eventually ended his career? What's your opinion on this?

Barère

Probably - it certainly influenced those who felt more at risk to act quickly and get support mainly by going around and telling colleagues that their names were in Maximilien's black list. This was obviously not true. I doubt if he ever had such a list.

But it worked. People would rather believe than not anything like this and to be on the safe side they'd be prepared to join those who profess to know the truth.

Author

Why do you think Maximilien didn't mention names when he was asked to do so at the National Convention?

Barère

Why do you think they wanted him to do it?

Author

Why?

Barère

To have the proof that he was truly a dictator who not only controlled the committees but even the convention itself. Maximilien was no fool. He knew this and therefore refused to mention names. As I said, if this caused his downfall, it was in a roundabout way, by giving his enemies the ammunition they needed to frighten colleagues into submission.

Author

It seems to me that some people believed he had more power than he actually had.

Barère

He was a powerful man, no doubt about it. In legal terms, he wasn't more powerful than any of the other committee members, this is true, but in other subtler terms, he had immense power.

Author

Could you explain the reasons for this?

Barère

No one can. In so many ways, he could have been what Napoleon later became, but his philosophy stopped him from going that far. Yes, I know, you were asking me about his real power.

Author

You mentioned "subtler terms".

Barère

Yes, it was all very subtle.

Author

Like a Machiavellian prince?

Barère

Almost - except that a Machiavellian prince would work for his own advantage and Maximilien would never do such a thing. He had this endearing way of looking at

what he called "the people". It was very much a thing of his imagination, well, not truly his, of course - he was imbibed in Rousseau's ideas, but what I found endearing is the way he believed in it, as much as he believed in that Supreme Being of his.

Author

The two went together perhaps.

Barère

Yes, they did. His belief in the Supreme Being was his link with ordinary people's belief in God. I've often heard him saying that he was part of the people, but his only connection with them was this belief. In any other way he was as bourgeois as the rest of us. I'm sure he realised this and perhaps wished it would have been otherwise.

Author

A Russian once called Robespierre a "sentimental tiger"

Barère

I quite like it.

Author

From all that we've been saying, it's obvious that he was a man of thought and not a man of action.

Barère

You could say so, although such a definition is far too simplistic and won't do to explain the whole individual. That's why there'll always be a debate about Maximilien; you can never encapsulate the man. He'll always be different things to different people.

Author

What is he for you?

Barère

A good man with excellent intentions who could have gone much further with a little bit more tact

Billaud walks in.

Billaud

Bertrand, I'd like to talk to you? Ah! I'm sorry. I didn't realise you had a visitor.

Barère

Please don't go. Our visitor may appreciate this opportunity to meet you too. Am I right?

Author

Certainly. Billaud, I'm glad to meet you.

Billaud

You know my name?

Barère

She seems to know us well. Apparently she's seen our portraits.

Billaud

How can I be of help?

Author

I'm the Author of this play.

Barère

And she's come because she wants to talk to Maximilian.

Billaud

Ah! In that case, you'd better give up now. He won't speak to you. He won't speak to anyone.

Barère

No, no. Let's not be so hasty. We might be able to persuade him to see her.

Billaud

You may, Bertrand, if you want to waste your time, but I won't even attempt it. Sorry.

I have to be blunt.

Author

I appreciate your honesty. You must have a good reason for speaking the way you do.

Billaud

If your intention is to talk to Maximilian, I'm afraid you won't be able to do it. Others have come with the same purpose and have failed. I don't see any reason to believe you'll be different. Barère should have told you. But how could he? He only tells people what they want to hear.

Author

What people want to hear and the truth occasionally coincide.

Billaud

Rarely in real life.

Barère

This is a play, though.

Billaud

Am I in it?

Author

You seem to be.

Barère

You just walked in, as if you were on to the stage, my dear chap.

Author

Does it bother you?

Billaud

I don't know. I don't like the theatre. I mistrust plays and all that make believe that goes on in them. What's the intention behind the author's mind after all? You pick up your characters and make them talk and perhaps say what they would have rather kept to themselves. There are things I did I'm not proud of. I behaved very badly at the time Maximilian was arrested.

Barère

We all did.

Billaud

No, I was worse. But I still don't know what came over me. Emotions are a dangerous thing. They can blow you away and make you say and do things contrary to all your beliefs and principles. I'm truly sorry. Maybe you're right. Maybe I should be in the play and be the villain.

Author

I wasn't planning to have a villain.

Billaud

Well, now you have one. I must go. Sorry to have interrupted your tête-à-tête.

Barère

Won't you stay? I'm sure the author would love to have your views. I'll get another chair. Do stay.

Exit Barère

Billaud

I don't want to be rude to you, but I don't think I have anything else to say. What I said once cannot be unsaid and what I did cannot be undone.

Author

And yet, you had the courage to recognise it. The typical villain doesn't usually go to such extremes. And when you were given the chance to return to your country after your exile, you refused because you could not live under Napoleon's dictatorship after you had worked so hard for the Revolution. That fits more a hero's than a villain's role.

Billaud

You'll end up by making me blush. You know too much.

Author

I know enough to know that you could not be the villain of this play.

Billaud sits down.

Billaud

What I said about Maximilian was right. You'll never get to see him.

Author

Why?

Billaud

He sees no point in talking to anyone. You're not his first visitor. I see that Barère hasn't told you. There's been a constant stream of visitors and he has refused to see them all. He'll refuse to see you too.

Author

I have to try all the same.

Billaud

I can't stop you, if that's your wish but it's my duty to warn you.

Barère comes with another chair.

Barère

I've just seen Maximilian.

Author

And?

Billaud

Tell her the truth. She's expecting it.

Barère

You may be lucky

Billaud

What? Is it fair to raise her hopes when you know the case is hopeless?

Barère

No, no, far from it - I wouldn't say it's hopeless at all. Listen, sooner or later he has to come to his senses and perhaps this is the time. Our charming author may be the one

Billaud

Don't believe him. If I were you I'd go now.

Barère

What about the play?

Billaud

What play? There's no play.

Barère

Why? Because you don't want to be the villain, is that it? And in any case, the author says she doesn't want to have a villain.

Billaud

There might not be a villain, but if you were planning on Maximilien to be the hero, I can tell you plainly: there won't be a hero either. This is going nowhere.

Author

I disagree: the play is still on.

Billaud

Well, good luck to you, that's all I can say.

Exit Billaud

Barère

Please do forgive him. It's the way he is. He can't help it.

Author

What about Maximilien? Do you think there's a possibility that I may talk to him?

Barère

Yes.

Author

What did he say when you spoke to him?

Barère

He said no.

Author

Ah!

Barère

But it's not what he said but the way he said it.

They sit down.

I noticed a change, almost imperceptible, but there was a change. His tone of voice betrayed him. And there was the smallest of hesitations, something I've never noticed before. And there was something else.

Author

What?

Barère

The expression on his face

Author

I didn't realise you were such a good observer of human nature.

Barère

My dear, if I had not been one, I would have never survived those grim days of the Revolution. I suggest you wait here with me and that to pass the time I offer you a cup of coffee. What do you say to that?

Author

A cup of coffee will be very welcome.

Barère

Stay where you are. I'll bring it to you.

Exit Barère. Author gets up and walks around the stage, looking and listening.

Lights off

Scene 3

Author, Barère and Collot sit at the table drinking their coffee.

Collot

As soon as I heard there was a play, you have to understand, I needed to come. I was an actor once, and if I may say so, an excellent one, but of course you must be aware of it.

Author

I am.

Barère

She knows everything.

Author

If only!

Collot

You can count on me fully and unconditionally, my dear. With my name on the billboard the success of the play is guaranteed.

Barère

There's Collot for you.

Collot

What's exactly what you'd like me to say?

Author

What do you mean?

Collot

What would you like me to say in the play, of course?

Author

Pretty much what you're saying now, I suppose.

Collot

Don't you have a script for me to memorise?

Author

No, not really.

Collot

No script? I see. Oh, well, so what sort of a play is this going to be?

Author

I'm not sure yet.

Collot

I see now. You're still working out the plot. Good. I'm sure I can help you with it. I have plenty of experience and know what makes a play good or bad. It's essential, for a start, to have a good and intricate plot, one that baffles the audience and keeps them wondering right until the last minute when the secret is revealed.

Author and Barère

The secret?

Collot

Of course: Don't tell me you hadn't thought about the secret. Don't worry, that's exactly what I'm here for. We'll work it out together.

Barère

Aren't you being a little too hasty? This is not your play after all.

Collot

As far as I can see this is nobody's play yet.

Barère

But it has an Author.

Collot

Bah! With all due respect, my dear, authors are often more of a hindrance than a bonus. The success of a play depends on its performance and its performance depends

on the actors - nothing simpler. But... May I ask you a question? Why are you here if you're the Author? This is most irregular. I was never present in one of my own plays.

Author

In some sense you must have been, not physically on the stage and yet there must have been so much of you in each of your characters.

Collot

Yes, maybe, but that isn't the same at all. Why are you here? That's what I want to know and I think we deserve to be told.

Author

It was the only way. This time I couldn't count on my characters on their own.

Collot

I believe you're confusing matters unnecessarily and, what is more to the point, this play is going to turn into a very peculiar exercise, unless I do something about it. I understand you may not want my services as a fellow writer, and in that case, if I'm only here in the capacity of a character and have nothing to do with the creation of the play, well, then if there's blame - and I'm sorry to say that there will be blame - it should fall entirely on your shoulders. Do you agree?

Author

I do. Will you collaborate with me?

Collot

I'll tell you what. While you two drink your coffee I'll go out and jot down a few ideas. I know exactly where your problem lies. It's your lack of imagination that has brought you here, I see it now, but trust me, with Collot's imagination this play can still be a success. I'll be back.

Exit Collot

Barère

I don't know what to say - he's always been boisterous, but the thought of this play seems to have turned his head.

Author

It'll be all right. I quite like him.

Barère

I'm glad you do, because I don't expect we're going to get rid of him that easily. This coffee is not very good, is it? Ah, dear me. You've certainly stirred things up for us. It's quite a change.

Author

I'm very grateful for your assistance, for all you've told me and all you've already done.

Barère

I'll be happy to do much more.

Author

Speak to Maximilien and let me know if you notice further changes in him.

Barère

I'll gladly do that, but it doesn't seem right to leave you alone again.

Author

I can wait.

Barère

I'll see what I can do.

Exit Barère

Author remains sitting and drinks her coffee.

Robespierre walks in and stops behind her chair.

Robespierre

Did you want to talk to me?

Lights off

Scene 4

Author and Barère

Author

He was here behind me, willing to talk and then I don't know what I said or what I did and he went out, without a single word. Why? What went wrong? We were so close.

Barère

There's no need to panic. You have to be patient.

Author

He may not want to see me again. Perhaps he had a look at me and disliked me so much that he'd refuse to have anything else to do with me.

Barère

No, not at all - I believe his reaction had more to do with him than with whatever you might have said. I can imagine what is going in his mind. Do you remember what Billaud said to you that he would refuse to speak to anyone? He was right, until now. He's almost on the point of changing, but it's going to take a little longer. Believe me. I'm almost sure.

Author

Do I wait here or do I go and come back some other time?

Barère

Stay. I know this place is not very welcoming, but I don't want you to walk around and get lost in the maze of rooms and end up having to talk to Caligula.

Author

I trust you.

Enter Collot carrying a notebook and pen

Collot

Trust Barère? I'd warn you against it. You may do it at your own peril. What's the matter? Do I smell despondence in the air? Oh dear, let me guess. The plot is still eluding you, am I right?

Author

You could be.

Collot

There's no need to worry. I, Collot d'Herbois, the famous playwright and renowned actor, is coming to the rescue! I've written a few notes already.

Author

That's my notebook and this is my pen. Where did you find them?

Collot

On the floor in the corridor. I thought someone must have thrown them away.

Barère

Had you lost them?

Author

No, I wasn't allowed to bring them in. They said they were forbidden items.

Barère

Forbidden? Why?

Author

I have no idea.

Collot

You can have them back.

Author

No, keep them. It seems that they'll be more useful to you than they're ever going to be to me.

Collot

You're a sensible person, my dear, and you won't regret it. Your friend Collot is here to turn this play of yours into the greatest office box success of the year.

Barère

What year? Do you by any chance know which year it might be?

Collot

No, I don't, and I don't much care - whichever the year, the play will be a hit. You see, the author is already smiling.

Barère

She's smiling at your stupidity. Have you forgotten that this is a play about Robespierre?

Collot

Robespierre? No one has ever mentioned his name to me.

Barère

I have now.

Collot

That changes things of course, but only slightly. We can bring him in as a very minor character.

Barère

He's the hero.

Collot

He can't be. We're talking about Maximilien Robespierre, the man we're all familiar with, aren't we? Then, it's clear. Maximilien cannot be the hero of any play, because - let's face it - he was never a hero while he was alive!

Barère

He had his moments.

Collot

Please, Barère, let's be honest for once. But perhaps that's too much to ask from a man like you. In any case, it's the author I've come to see and not you. (*Talking to the Author*) I've written a few notes and I have many more ideas in my head. Shall I tell you?

Author

Please do.

Barère

It's all going to be a waste of time for you, my dear. In your case, I would

Collot

What?

Author

(To Barère) How shall we know if it's going to be a waste of time if we don't give him a chance? Let Collot have his say.

Barère

(Sitting down) Very well

Collot

Are you going to stay?

Barère

Do you object?

Collot

Provided you keep quiet

Barère

I'll do my best.

Author

Ignore him. Let's listen to your play.

Collot

Here's my idea. Let's imagine a hero who is an upright and brave young man, prepared to leave his home and friends behind in order to save his beloved from the

grasp of a wicked wizard who keeps her under his spell. Our hero has fallen irreparably in love with her and swears he will get her out of her bondage. We need lots of action, lots of episodes in which our hero overcomes all sorts of difficulties, all sorts of hardships for the sake of his beloved. And when it seems that he will be finally united with her, the wizard turns her into a wax doll. The hero cannot break the spell and will die broken-hearted.

Barère

That's extremely sad.

Collot

I know. My original intention was to have a happy ending.

Barère

So what went wrong?

Author

Plots never turn the way you expect.

Collot

One thinks one is in control

Author

but one never is. It's a beautiful tale.

Barère

Extremely sad - how can a play like this ever be successful?

Author

"Romeo and Juliet" and "Hamlet" come to mind.

Barère

No, it won't do. Where will Robespierre fit into it?

Collot

He can be one of the jailers! Why not?

Billaud walks in

Billaud

Are you still here?

Barère

She saw Maximilien.

Billaud

So have I. Where's he now?

Author

He left before I had a chance to speak to him.

Billaud

You should go. There's nothing here for you.

Collot

But she can't go. There's the play.

Billaud

What is it to you?

Barère

Collot's right. What would the audience say?

Billaud

They'll give a sigh of relief, get up and go home.

Barère

It doesn't seem the proper thing to do. After all, they've paid for their seats.

Collot

We can still save the play, but we'll need to make drastic changes. Let's forget entirely about Maximilien.

Barère

Impossible! He's the hero.

Billaud

What made you choose him of all people?

Author

I didn't - He chose me.

Billaud

And now he refuses to have anything to do with it. Typical of the man.

Collot

It makes sense. That's Maximilien all over again.

Barère

It could be a question of stage fright.

Billaud

Nonsense

Collot

It's true. Stage fright cannot be dismissed. After all it's much more common than you may think.

Billaud

How can a man so used to speak in public to large audiences have stage fright?

Barère

That was a long time ago. We don't really know what his feelings might be at the moment. He hardly speaks to us in this place. He hardly speaks to anyone.

Collot

Let's get on with my plot. It's all we seem to have.

Barère

(To the Author) Don't give up on Maximilien.

Author

He's given up on us.

Author, Barère and Billaud sit on the chairs and Collot sits on the table.

Collot

Imagine a young man, naïve but pure, who arrives at the capital from the provinces. He's had a vision of a beautiful woman in chains in a dark dungeon, deprived of all her rights, who languishes and is on the point of dying. Our young hero has fallen in love with her and his only mission in life is to rescue her from the claws of her enemies and the powerful wizard that keeps her prisoner. *(Robespierre walks in behind them and no one will notice him until he starts talking.)* At first he doesn't know how to go about it. He joins a group of men he believes can help him. In fact these men swear that they are also bent on rescuing her. However, the hero finds out

that they have other interests at heart and that in many cases rescuing the woman is but a pretext to achieve their own purposes.

Robespierre

But he has misjudged the strength of the monster and is powerless against it. In the end all is lost.

Author

What happened to the beautiful woman?

Billaud

She was a mirage - she never truly existed.

Robespierre

She did and could have been saved. But when she began to see the light of day from her dungeon cell and thought she would be free from her chains, the dark night returned and she was hurled into the deepest and darkest dungeon, much more painful than the one she had been because now she knew that light existed, that it wasn't pure fable.

Author

What happened to the young man?

Robespierre

He was no longer young, or naïve or even noble. His hands too were stained with too much blood. He was a broken man.

Collot

I had intended a happy ending.

Barère

We all did once

Author

There must have been a glimmer of hope somewhere.

Robespierre

The task was too great for human hands. We needed divine intervention, we needed the help of the Supreme Being to see us through.

Billaud

You annoy me with your Supreme Being.

Robespierre

If you ignore your spiritual dimension, you're powerless.

Barère

It was generally agreed that the people was in need of some consolation.

Robespierre

We're all the people. the people is formed by individuals and each individual counts with spiritual support

Collot

It needs to be a melodrama

Barère

Does it?

Collot

It's the most successful genre. It carries the audience away with its strong emotions.

Barère

How do you intend to go about it?

Collot

First we'll create our hero: an ardent young man, full of illusions and with a brilliant future ahead. He's spoilt by everyone around him. He has it all, status, money, intellect, good looks, sociability and kindness. He empathises with those who suffer and those who are oppressed. Then one day he meets our heroine, the most beautiful young woman and yet a servant - no - a slave under the domineering power of a tyrant, the richest and most powerful man of the land. The hero falls desperately in

love with the heroine and swears that he will rescue her from her condition or die in the attempt

Barère

Very noble, I must say.

Collot

The hero is above all a man of law and order and will first of all try to persuade the tyrant to let the heroine go. But no persuasion is possible with such a monster, not only he won't hear the hero's supplications but seeing that the young man is in love with her, he sends her away to a castle he has far away and plunges her in its deepest dungeons. Now the hero's adventures truly begin. He must struggle and fight against hundreds of evil rivals to find his way to the heroine. He has no friends. He needs to do it all single-handed, but his courage is supernatural, he conquers them all and at last he's got the key that opens the cell where her beloved is imprisoned.

Robespierre

But when he opens the door he realises it was a trick, she is no longer there. The scoundrels have taken her away. He turns for help, but no one is interested. The only thing they care about is themselves. They tell him to stop the search and let her be a slave forever.

Author

Will the hero not fight on?

Robespierre

Against whom? The whole world?

Author

He must have some friends

Robespierre

What are a few friends against the whole world? No, he gives up and dies.

Author

Does power necessarily bring out the worst in man?

Robespierre

Only in some

Billaud

Why are you looking at me?

Robespierre

What if I do?

Billaud

I never abused my power, did I? Did I? What's wrong with you all?

Collot

Does it matter now? We failed.

Robespierre

We did.

Billaud

We did.

Barère

Alas.

Author

Were your expectations too high, too unrealistic?

Barère

Probably

Collot

This is no play. It feels more like a committee meeting. We're losing the plot.

Robespierre

Whose plot?

Billaud

There was never a plot.

Barère

That's not actually true. We did have expectations. We had plans.

Billaud

Did we indeed?

Robespierre

Yes, we did, the shame was that our expectations were different and that's why in the end...

Billaud

We failed

Robespierre

We failed

Barère

We failed

Collot

We failed, all right, yes, we did, but we're on the verge of failing again. Today we've been given this wonderful opportunity - this play - are we going to let it pass without doing anything about it?

Billaud

What can a play do?

Collot

A play is the most fantastic way to convey our ideas and our feelings to a wide audience.

Robespierre

How will your fairy tale do that, convey our ideas and our feelings?

Collot

Fairy tales have an extraordinary power - they have a simple storyline and yet they can touch us in a most peculiar way, making us understand far more than what is being told.

Barère

We're too old for fairy tales, excusing the Author, of course.

Collot

Wrong. When it comes to fairy tales, age is irrelevant.

Robespierre

You were saying that they can make us understand far more than what is being said.

How can this be true? Do they have a secret meaning?

Collot

I cannot say for sure but through them we can understand ourselves more deeply.

Barère

Collot is turning into a philosopher.

Billaud

And not a very good one for that matter

Collot

Your problem is that you lack true feeling. This has nothing to do with philosophy.

Robespierre

Collot is right. There's something deep and beautiful in a fairy tale's simplicity.

Billaud

Yes. They all end up with a "happily ever after"! As a child you can believe in them, but as you grow old you realise they are but dreams.

Robespierre

And yet-

Author

Go on.

Robespierre

And yet, dreams also have their purpose. If neither of us had had dreams, we wouldn't have become involved in the Revolution - we would have stayed at home and play bridge. But we had dreams of a better future for all mankind and we tried hard to make them true.

Billaud

We tried hard. No one can deny that.

Barère

Too hard perhaps

Robespierre

No, not hard enough. We could have gone a little further if only there had been more like us.

Billaud

Us?

Robespierre

Our divisions were not the problem. You didn't like me, I didn't like Collot, Collot didn't like Barère and so what? we still wanted the Revolution to go on, the job was not fully done, there was still too much inequality-

Billaud

I agree, but our divisions played a part. It was because I hated you that I took sides against you.

Collot

So did I

Barère

It was the heat of the moment. We've all regretted it since.

Billaud

Still we did it and no regrets will change the fact.

Robespierre

You might have been the weights that tipped the balance, but if not yours there would have been others sooner or later. The Convention was not prepared to take the Revolution to the people. Most members had achieved what they wanted, had lined up their pockets at the expense of the poor and now their only concern was for a quiet and comfortable existence.

Billaud

And Napoleon came and gave it to them.

Collot

Don't mention Napoleon's name in my presence. He destroyed everything we had achieved.

Barère

Not everything, I wouldn't go so far.

Collot

You took advantage of his pardon and returned to France.

Billaud

I didn't. How could I live under another tyrant?

Collot

I wouldn't have either, if given the chance.

Robespierre

I had achieved all that I could within the constraints I'd been forced into. I knew my time was over well before the day of my execution. But my conscience was clear. I would never be involved with the scoundrels and if they wanted my life, they could have it, they did have it in the end. I hope it made them happy.

Barère

The Author must be disappointed with us - we've digressed so much - please forgive us

Billaud

It only shows that I was right and that there was no possible play here

Collot

We had the plot - we still have it

Billaud

What? Still your fairy tale?

Author

Why not?

Collot

A young man full of dreams comes into town and falls madly in love with the local lord's maidservant. He wants to rescue her from her dreary existence, but when the lord finds out, he takes the maidservant away and .

Billaud

Why were we so angry with each other?

Barère

Angry and tired

Robespierre

We had exhausted ourselves - I had, I couldn't give any more

Collot

Our enemies were all around us, outside and within our frontiers

Billaud

We should have remained united instead of giving rein to our passions. It was madness.

Robespierre

No one would listen

Collot

It was you, you, who wouldn't listen

Robespierre

I wouldn't listen to the stupid things you had to say

Collot

What stupid things?

Billaud

Enough: Can't you see? Even after our deaths we're still capable of the same scenes

Barère

Nothing has changed

Billaud

Except that we killed the Republic, banished liberty from our country and contributed to one of the most powerful dictatorships on earth

Collot

We should have had more sense

Billaud

I hated you so much

Robespierre

(Laughing) You were not my favourite colleague either!

Billaud

You could be such an infuriating man at times - so unwilling to compromise

Robespierre

You'll have to make a donkey dance a gavotte before you'll see me compromise. Do you know why the Revolution failed? Because you and you and you compromised

with our enemies. If we don't stand up for our principles, if we are unable to uphold them, then it's better to die knowing that at least we tried.

Billaud

Your conscience is clear.

Robespierre

On that point, yes - unfortunately, we also did things we shouldn't have done - things for which I was as guilty as you were

Billaud

The misfortune of revolutions is that we are obliged to act on the spur of the moment, there's no time to pause and think, everything has to be done in a blazing frenzy. We were all constrained by our fears of inaction, of seeing our ideas come to nothing

Robespierre

All that blood

Barère

It seemed necessary at the time. We were in a hurry to finish, to make the Revolution succeed

Collot

And every day it slipped a little bit more through our fingers

Robespierre

I saw it coming - the tragedy of it all. All our superhuman efforts wasted and then the irony when at the last moment they asked me to assume sole control and become a dictator!

End of Act One

ACT TWO

Scene 1

Author is sitting at the table writing on her notebook. Eleonore Duplay, Mrs. Stephen and Madame Chalabre walk in from the left and see the Author. After a few seconds of indecision, they approach her.

Stephen

Excuse me. Is this a good time to speak to you?

Author

(Surprised, she turns round and looks at each of them in turn) Yes, of course.

Eleonore

You have to forgive us for coming on to you like this. But we heard you were an author and had come to see Maximilien.

Author

Yes, that's true.

Chalabre

We came because we thought we could be of help to you. My name is Chalabre. I knew Maximilien extremely well.

Stephen

And my name is Mrs Stephen. I'm English. I met Robespierre a couple of times during my visits to Paris when he was a member of the Committee of Public Health.

Eleonore

And I'm Eleonore Duplay. Maximilien stayed in our house. My father used to rent rooms to deputies of the Convention because we lived very close to the Tuileries.

Author

I'm very pleased to meet you all.

Eleonore

Have you seen him already?

Author

Yes, I have

Eleonore

How's he?

Author

He didn't want to talk to me at the beginning, but later when I was discussing the play with some of his colleagues, he joined in.

Chalabre

Did you say a play? How exciting!

Eleonore

I can imagine Maximilian not being too eager to take part in a play.

Stephen

Why a play? What a ridiculous idea! Why not a history? A play can never reflect the true facts of life.

Author

I'm no historian.

Stephen

Then you shouldn't be writing about Robespierre. No wonder he didn't want to talk to you.

Chalabre

Don't pay any attention to her. I think a play is a wonderful thing. Maximilien adored plays. He used to read them aloud to us. He knew whole speeches by heart.

Eleonore

Yes, he loved plays but perhaps he would feel uncomfortable being the subject of one.

He was a modest man.

Chalabre

Nonsense, he was vain like all men. Didn't you say that he had come round to the idea?

Author

I believe so, or perhaps I should better say that I hope so.

Chalabre

The important thing is that we're not too late. I've always wanted to be in a play. Are you expecting him? And who were those colleagues of his you mentioned? Suddenly it's like being alive again... wondering and speculating...

Eleonore

You can ask us questions if you wish. As you see, we are all quite different. You won't say anything bad about Maximilien, will you? So many lies were said after his death, but he deserved much better. I've always wondered how a man so gentle and kind and polite was still in the eyes of others a monster. Did he send all those people to their death single-handed? Were they all scoundrels?

Chalabre

Yes and no, my dear. You see, I strongly disagree with Rousseau and his followers who say that men are born good and that society corrupts them. In my view, it's the opposite way: men are born corrupt and so society cannot but be corrupt in its turn.

Eleonore

What an extreme view!

Chalabre

Extreme if you like, but it seems to explain the events we lived through particularly well.

Eleonore

So, according to your theory, Maximilien was also born corrupt.

Chalabre

Yes, of course. But he failed to see it. He was too much of an idealist, too proud in the end to realise his own faults. You cannot be totally good. We're all scoundrels at heart.

Stephen

You might be right to say that human nature is flawed from the start and yet we still need people like Robespierre to show us that a man is also capable of being virtuous and brave enough to die for his own ideals.

Chalabre

I came to recognise that he was in love with concepts and when he fought for the oppressed, he fought for the symbol they represented in his mind rather than the men, women and children of flesh and bone. He was sincere in his love, I know, and that was what made him so charismatic, but in the end he stood alone - friends would

have kept him company, but he preferred the concept of friendship to the friends themselves. When the crowd lynched a royalist or plundered a grocer's shop, they were far from trying to express their faith in liberty and equality - they simply wanted loot and blood. Maximilien failed to see it that way. Don't look at me like that. What I'm telling you is true. We were... Well, we were very close to each other. I didn't care what people said when I moved across the road from his lodging. Provided I was close to him, they could say what they pleased. That sort of thing has never bothered me. Of course, it was necessary to keep certain conventions - particularly because he was such a popular figure. But there were means... Evenings at the Duplays' were such fun. Weren't they, Eleonore? There was a bit of everything: music, singing, dancing, amateur dramatics, poetry and serious conversations in which the future of the Revolution would be discussed. Nobody dreamed of what was to come.

Eleonore

He did. He worried a lot specially during the last months. I think he knew exactly what was coming.

Author

(To Eleonore) What was he like?

Eleonore

He was like a brother to us, the kindest and most affectionate one. I believe my mother would have wished that we felt for each other in a different way, but that was never the case. Perhaps I would have married him if he had asked me, but he didn't. We were all very proud to have him living with us. I was very fond of his younger

brother. He came to visit us occasionally and used to flirt with me. No one took him seriously. He was very charming and knew how to talk to women. He could even flirt with my mother, would you believe it?

Barère comes in, immediately sees Eleonore and walks towards her.

Barère

My dear Eleonore, it's been a long time

Eleonore

Monsieur Barère, how are you, my very dear old friend?

Barère

The better after seeing you

Eleonore

As charming as always. It was such a privilege to have you with us during those long winter evenings. You've probably forgotten all about it.

Barère

How could I? The pleasure was all mine. I'll never forget that beautiful voice of yours.

Eleonore

Do you remember my bad singing?

Barère

No one could forget your sweet voice.

Eleonore

You had a good strong baritone voice and were also very skilful on the keyboard.

Barère

I remember. At times I was the only one who could play a good tune, even if all the notes were not right

They move to the back of the stage and keep talking. In the meantime, Stephen has joined the Author and is talking to her

Stephen

I hardly knew him personally. I was interested in what he stood for. He struck me as a very private person. There are people who tell you all about them the first time you meet them, but he wasn't like that. He was extremely polite and "comme il faut":

Never a word or a gesture out of place. It was a pleasure to be with him. Nevertheless, I was very annoyed with him when he refused my money point-blank. I thought it was because I was a foreigner and I felt very hurt. I came to see him at the Tuileries and at first he took me for someone else, which didn't help at all. Then, when he realised who I was, he did apologise. I think he was coming out of a Committee meeting and there had been a row. He tried to explain and did it so convincingly that I was obliged to accept his apologies. But I think I know the man who is coming. Excuse me.

Stephen walks to meet Billaud who has just come in

Author

(Aside) Was there a special woman in Robespierre's life, someone he cared for more than any other?

Stephen

Monsieur Billaud, good day!

Billaud

Mrs Stephen!

Stephen

You haven't forgotten me.

Billaud

No. I remember you coming to the Committee offices and also to the Convention. I see you're not alone this time. Are you, ladies, the chorus?

Stephen

The chorus? What do you mean?

Billaud

The chorus of the play. You must have heard about this play, otherwise I very much doubt you'd be here.

Stephen

Of course, but I didn't realise this was going to be a classical play in need of a chorus!

Billaud

The chorus of adoring servants perhaps. It fits in very nicely, don't you think?

Stephen

I had forgotten how sarcastic you could be.

Billaud

Sarcasm is a good remedy for depression

Stephen

Are you depressed?

Billaud

Who wouldn't after having reached such heights and fallen down so sharply?

They move to the back of the stage and join Eleonore and Barère at the same time as Robespierre walks in. Chalabre sees him and rushes to him with open arms.

Robespierre

Dearest Chalabre!

Chalabre

Dearest dearest Robespierre!

They embrace

Author

(Aside) Is this the answer to my question, I wonder?

Collot came in behind Robespierre and joins the Author on centre stage.

Collot

Look at them: a full range of characters for us to choose from. There on the left, the ever charming Barère, still flirting with Eleonore. I could bet you that he is telling her what an accomplished lady she was. She smiles sweetly, denying with her head while welcoming his praises with heartfelt warmth. And here on the right, the serious-minded Billaud, now that he's dead being more serious than he ever was when alive. I can hear him talking to the English woman about the Revolution and about our dream, that unaccomplished dream. She is serious too and enjoys the conversation. They seem to have a lot in common those two.

Author

And what about the third couple? What do you make out of that relationship?

Collot

Ah!

Author

Is that all?

Collot

Could he really love her? Could he really love any woman?

Author

Do you doubt it?

Collot

I'm sorry; I can't see Robespierre in that kind of role. Robespierre the lover? No, no.

The lover of himself, most likely.

Author

They look quite intimate

Collot

whispering into each other's ears and talking about conspiracies, corruption and fraud, anything except love, I promise you. In any case, she betrayed him in the end.

Author

Only after he was dead and to save her own skin.

Collot

Betrayed all the same. But they're looking at us. I think the unbearably pretty Mme Chalabre wants to speak to you.

Chalabre

(To the Author) You have to be grateful to me, my dear. I've persuaded Robespierre to talk to you and to us all from his heart, the way he always did. Come, come, friends, let's listen to our hero.

*They all assemble around Robespierre, some sitting on the chairs, some standing.
Robespierre stands on centre stage.*

Billaud

(Still talking to Mrs Stephen) Much had been achieved but the future was still unsure. Caution was needed if we wanted to succeed against our enemies.

Robespierre

Caution but not weakness or hesitation in our purpose, otherwise you saw what happened: the scoundrels got the upper hand. We should have never allowed it to happen. We had fought until then to give France and the French people a life worth living and it was our duty to carry our mission through to the end and at whatever cost. For the first time in history a country had been given the opportunity of breaking

away from an old-fashioned system of government, which was tyrannical and looked after the interests of the few to the gross disadvantage of the many. If France would not take this unique opportunity, if we squandered it, we would have done the greatest injustice to the ordinary people not just of our country but of the whole world. We owed it to the innocent oppressed to persevere and never give into the stratagems of those who would rather see us fail in our endeavours for the sake of their petty interests. This was too important an occasion to miss, perhaps the only one men would ever have. Many would speak to you about republican ideals and their concern for the ordinary people, but beware, take a good look at the individual and see where they really come from: look at their own lives, compare what they do with what they say: only like this you'll know if their ambition is genuine or if their words are pretty words, carefully put together, coming from their head and not from their heart. Beware of them, they sound so genuine and yet they are the real enemies of the people, much more dangerous than our so called princes of the blood, whose actions might be reprehensible but perfectly match with their words. Never let yourself be charmed by a hypocrite. That would be your worst tragedy. You may admire my fine speeches, but anyone can deliver fine speeches. Only accept them if they come from the speaker's heart. And how can you find whether they do? This is easier said than done. Some speakers sound so true and sincere that they will fool you. That's why I believe you have to look attentively at the man behind the speech and the fine words. Where does he come from? Where's he going to? And perhaps, more to the point, where does he stand at this moment in time? Don't let yourself be duped by a clever scoundrel. Their words can be so persuasive and their feelings so tender - you may even detect some tears in their eyes - I even believe that they could in many instances be fooled by their own words into believing that they are genuine. These could be the

most dangerous of them all. So I say: listen to them but, more importantly, watch what they do. What do we want riches for? Why do we hanker after material gain? Isn't the smile on a child's face worth more than all the millions in the world? Isn't the simplicity of a life well lived much more rewarding than a heap of luxuries? I haven't got anything against luxuries as such if only we could all share them, but how can anyone live with such superfluous luxuries and yet know that his fellow men are suffering, starving because they don't even have a piece of bread to take to their mouths. And it's us, only us, at the top of government that could make a difference. We were the ones who had the power to do it and to show the world that if France could do it, so could also they. Beware of fine empty words so difficult to detect because so engaging. Don't be fooled by them. If you think that my words are fine, don't stop there: look at the man, the source of those words and only then make your own conclusions. I died because the scoundrels of this world gained the upper hand. Let posterity judge me. I ask for nothing else.

Light becomes dimmer and all the characters with the exception of the Author slowly disappear in the darkness. Assistant 2 walks in from the left.

Assistant 2

(Seeing the Author) Ah! There you are! We've been looking for you everywhere. It's closing time, you must leave now. *(Author picks up her notebook and pen from the table.)* How did you manage to bring those in? They are forbidden items. *(Author goes out and Assistant 2 follows her.)* *Lights off*

End of play

Structure of the Play

Act One

Author waits her turn and walks in.

Author talks to Barère, Billaud and Collot

Brief encounter with Robespierre

Author despondence cured by Barère's optimism and Collot's ideas for the play

Billaud joins the group

As Collot gives vent to his ideas, Robespierre walks in and joins in the conversation

Act Two

The Author is alone writing when the three women arrive

Robespierre has an emotional encounter with Chalabre

Barère and Eleonore discuss old times

Billaud confers with Stephen

Collot and Author watch the scenes.

Chalabre comes to suggest Robespierre talk to the company

Robespierre expresses his feelings

Light becomes dimmer and the characters slowly leave the scene

Assistant arrives to tell Author it's time to leave