

La Comédiathèque

BACKSTAGE BITS

Jean-Pierre Martinez

comediatheque.net

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The ups and downs of the noble profession of acting, portrayed through a series of around fifteen short scenes that humorously highlight the quirks and pitfalls of what might also be considered the oldest profession in the world.

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1 – To Earn a Living

One character (man or woman) is present. Their phone rings, they answer the call.

One – Yes, Cindy... Who? Oh, right, I'd completely forgotten about him. What a pain... No, no, let him in, otherwise he'll never leave me alone...

A pause, during which they check their phone screen. Another character enters (also gender-neutral).

One – Ah, my dear friend! Come in, come in.

Two – Thanks for seeing me like this, unannounced.

One – Well, I *am* your agent. My door is always open...

Two – I've been trying to get an appointment for the past three weeks. No success...

One – Sorry. I've been very busy lately.

Two – So I decided to just show up. Without an appointment.

One – And you did the right thing. It's been a while, hasn't it?

Two – It really has

One – I think the last time was... Actually, I can't remember at all...

Two – Wasn't it at the funeral of that actor who starved to death after waiting three years for his agent to get him a role? Even just a bread-and-butter one...

One – Still joking, I see. Good to know you haven't lost your sense of humour.

Two – Don't count on it lasting, just so you know.

One – So then, what brings you here today?

Two – What brings me here? You've been promising me a film role for months. I'm still waiting...

One – It's tricky at the moment. Things are tough, you know...

Two – You just told me you were very busy.

One – Lots of projects have been shelved due to lack of funding. Even ones with big names...

Two – And what about the French cultural exception? Those cosy subsidies the whole world admires — while they balloon the national deficit?

One – Subsidies are drying up, believe me. Back in the day, all you needed was to know a secretary at the Ministry of Culture to get advance funding. You could shoot any old rubbish and screen it in empty cinemas without risking a cent. These days, you practically have to know the Minister — and the Minister changes every three months!

Two – Or we could just try making good films. Ones people actually want to see. Ones that pay for themselves.

One – Unfortunately, in France, success is synonymous with vulgarity.

Two – Exactly. “Popular” or “mainstream” have become dirty words. And it’s with the taxes of the poor that we make films that impress the bourgeoisie.

One – You know what they say: subsidised culture, a culture of subsidies...

Two – Still, films are being made, right?

One – Yes... Mostly comedies. Frankly, a load of old rubbish.

Two – I’d rather be in rubbish than not act at all. Plenty of great actors built their careers on rubbish films.

One – Yes... But comedy...

Two – What?

One – Well, let’s be honest. You’re not exactly what you’d call a comic actor.

Two – Oh really? And why’s that?

One – I don’t know... It’s just that... when people look at you, laughing isn’t exactly their first reaction.

Two – What about television, then? Arte only shows depressing stuff. Surely you could find me something that suits me.

One – Arte... It’s mostly co-productions. With the Germans, mainly. And when it comes to gloomy actors, believe me, the Germans are already well stocked. Do you speak German?

Two – No.

A pause.

One – I might be able to get you an advert. At a push.

Two – An advert?

One – Given the current climate... It’s better than nothing. You’d still be on telly.

Two – An advert for what?

One – Strasbourg sausages.

Two – I’m vegetarian.

One – Then it really *would* be acting...

Two – An ad for sausages... And what’s the role?

One – A bloke eating sausages. In Strasbourg.

Two – Right...

One – Interested?

Two – Let's go with the sausages.

One – Of course, there'll be an audition.

Two – Of course.

One – And they say agents are useless!

Blackout.

2 – A Screen Kiss

Two characters (men or women) are present. They remain silent for a moment.

One – I've got a bad feeling about this love scene.

Two – Who's it with?

One – Fred.

Two – Ah, yes...

A pause.

One – Have you worked with him before?

Two – Yes...

One – And you didn't notice anything?

Two – Well, yes...

One – He's got terrible breath.

Two – No doubt about it.

One – How can someone's breath be *that* bad?

Two – It's like a jackal's breath, honestly.

One – Even if you never brushed your teeth, could it really smell that bad?

Two – Must be some kind of liver problem. I can't think of any other explanation.

One – And of course, no one dares say anything.

Two – Bit awkward, isn't it?

One – Do you think he knows?

Two – Knows what?

One – That he stinks!

Two – No idea...

One – Maybe not.

Two – Maybe when you've got bad breath, you can't smell it yourself.

One – Yeah... telling him might actually be doing him a favour.

Two – At the very least, it'd be a favour to everyone else.

One – His co-stars, for starters.

A pause.

Two – What if *we* had bad breath too, and no one's ever dared to tell us?

One – Now that's a worrying thought.

Two – If I had bad breath, would you tell me?

One – Not sure...

Two – That's a bit scary, isn't it?

One – Don't worry, I've never noticed anything.

Two – OK...

One – Maybe you spit a little when you talk, that's all.

Two – I spit?

One – I said a little.

Two – Well... thanks for telling me. I'll try to be more careful.

One – OK... *(Pause)* And what about me?

Two – What?

One – Do I spit?

Two – I haven't noticed...

One – OK... But have you noticed anything else?

Two – Not really.

One – OK.

Two – I think I heard you fart once or twice.

One – Oh, that... Well, it's not always easy to control.

Two – I know, but... in the middle of a scene, during filming, it can really throw your scene partner off, you know?

One – I get it... When was the last time?

Two – This morning... In that scene we did together.

One – Ah, yes...

Two – You tell me you've seen the Virgin Mary at the back of a cave. And right after the word "cave", you let one rip.

One – I see...

Two – It's not easy to keep going after that.

One – I'm really sorry.

Two – It was pretty funny, to be fair, but still...

One – Yeah...

Two – You didn't do it on purpose, did you?

One – I did.

Two – I thought as much.

One – That scene was so ridiculous. I just couldn't help myself.

Two – The Virgin...

One – In a cave... I mean, come on.

Two – If you'd seen her at the bottom of a sake glass in a Chinese restaurant, *that* would've been funny.

One – How do screenwriters still come up with crap like that in the 21st century?

Two – It's telly. They write whatever they're told to...

One – I wonder who still watches TV. I mean proper national channels.

Two – Old people.

One – And when all the old people are dead?

Two – We'll be dead too.

One – This little chat's really cheered me up. Just before I go and snog a bloke with the breath of a camel.

Two – Yeah... We don't have an easy job, do we?

Blackout.

3 – Casting Call

One character is waiting. Another arrives.

Two – Hi.

One – Hi.

Two – This is the place for the casting, right?

One – Yeah.

Two – OK. *(A pause)* So... it's just the two of us?

One – Apparently.

A pause.

Two – I can't remember, what's the role again?

The other takes out a sheet of paper and glances at it.

One – It's for the part of Albert Einstein.

Two – Albert Einstein...?

One – Yep. Albert Einstein.

Two – Right... Are you sure...? *(He pulls out his own sheet and checks it)* Mine says... Adolf Hitler.

One – Let's see. *(The other hands him the sheet and he glances at it)* Ah, yeah...

Two – Maybe there are two roles.

One – Yeah...

Two – Is it for film or television?

The other checks his sheet again.

One – It's for a play.

Two – A play with Einstein and Hitler...?

One – Yeah.

Two – I'm guessing it's not a comedy...

One – It's an imagined confrontation between the two men. In real life, they never met.

Two – I doubt they'd have had much to say to each other.

One – Hitler despised what he called "Jewish physics". Which, in a way, was lucky. It meant the Nazis were slow to invest in nuclear research. That's what allowed the Americans to get the bomb first.

Two – Oh, really...?

One – In the end, it was Hitler's antisemitism that helped bring about the fall of the Third Reich.

Two – OK...

One – In 1933, Einstein went into exile in the US. He was the one who convinced Roosevelt to launch the Manhattan Project.

Two – The Manhattan Project...?

One – The programme that developed the first atomic bomb.

Two – Right... So it's a kind of showdown between Einstein and Hitler.

One – That's it.

The other looks around again.

Two – Well, if it's just the two of us, we're guaranteed a part.

One – Yeah.

A pause.

Two – Would you rather play Einstein or Hitler?

One – What about you?

Two – Not sure.

One – Playing a genius or a monster... Though call.

Two – I can't really see myself playing Hitler.

One – No? What's the issue?

Two – I don't know... The moustache, for starters.

One – The moustache?

Two – I guess we'll have to wear fake ones.

One – And...?

Two – Fake moustaches never stay on properly...

One – OK... But Einstein had a moustache too.

Two – Did he?

One – Yeah... And a much bigger one than Hitler's.

Two – Oh, damn...

One – So you'd rather play Einstein, then?

Two – I don't know... We'll see.

One – We could flip a coin.

Two – You think?

One – Why not?

Two – Alright.

One – Heads, I’m Einstein. Tails, you’re Hitler.

Two – OK.

The first flips a coin, then picks it up and shows it to the second.

One – Heads, I’m Einstein.

Two – OK... I never really saw myself as a genius anyway.

One – Fair enough...

Blackout.

4 – Directing Actors

Two characters (men or women) are there, looking puzzled.

One – I'm not quite sure how to play this character. What about you?

Two – It's not easy.

One – That's normal. You need time to make the role your own.

Two – Yeah. To really get under the character's skin.

One – That's what the crew never seems to understand.

Two – Sometimes not even the director.

One – We're not machines, are we?

Two – Exactly.

A pause.

One – How many times have we done that take now?

Two – Twenty-seven, I think.

One – Blimey – that many?

Two – When it doesn't want to happen...

One – The director seemed a bit on edge, didn't he?

Two – Yeah...

One – When the director's tense, it doesn't exactly help the actors relax.

Two – Apparently he'd have preferred us to know our lines *before* turning up on set.

One – Yeah, well... I don't work like that. Do you?

Two – No, me neither.

One – I need to *feel* the character first. The words come later.

Two – Obviously.

One – As if it were improvised, you know?

Two – Otherwise it doesn't feel natural.

One – Exactly.

Two – That's what the Nouvelle Vague directors used to advocate, wasn't it?

One – Godard left lots of room for improvisation.

Two – Truffaut too, I think.

A pause.

One – Did you get what he meant when he said, “Play it like your life depends on it”?

Two – I think he actually said, “Play it like your *future* depends on it.”

One – You sure?

Two – I’m not entirely sure I understood it.

One – What’s that supposed to mean, anyway...?

Two – Well... There are two ways of looking at it.

One – Oh yeah?

Two – If it’s “play it like your life depends on it”, it could mean acting with a real sense of urgency.

One – I see... Like it’s life or death.

Two – Exactly.

One – And the other way?

Two – If it’s “play it like your *future* depends on it”, it could mean...

One – What?

Two – “You lot are crap. You’d better pull your bloody socks up or you’ve got no future in this series.”

One – Oh, right...

Two – Yeah.

One – So you think it was more the second one?

Two – Yeah.

One – OK.

Two – Maybe we should run through it again.

One – Yeah... I reckon we’d better actually learn our lines.

Two – I know it’s not very professional... but still...

One – If our lives depend on it.

Two – Or at least our future in the business.

One – Actually, what he said really helped.

Two – Yeah...

One – A sense of urgency... Yeah, that’s it. We’ll play it with a sense of urgency.

Two – I’m sure take twenty-eight will be the one.

One – Me too, I’ve got a good feeling about it.

Two – Good direction makes all the difference.

One – That's how you spot a great director.

Two – Too right.

One – Right then, shall we run it again?

Two – OK. With the script in hand, then.

One – Better for now.

They both take out a sheet of paper.

Two – Here we go...

One (*reading*) – Hello, a coffee, please.

Two – Just a black coffee?

One – Black, yes. Like my mood... My wife just left me. And she took the coffee maker.

Two – I'll make it a double. On the house.

One – Thanks.

Two – Come on, don't worry...

One – Do you think she'll come back?

Two – No, but... maybe she'll return the coffee maker.

They put down their sheets.

One – I've got a good feeling this time, don't you?

Two – Yeah. I'm really in character now.

One – Shall we go again?

Two – We're gonna smash it, mate. Just watch...

Blackout.

5 – Exquisite Corpse

Two characters (men or women) are there, waiting for something.

One – You don't look well. Got stage fright?

Two – No, I've gone blank...

One – What do you mean, blank? Memory lapse? We haven't even started yet...

Two – I can't remember which play we're supposed to be doing.

One – It's Sunday. Don't we do *Hamlet* on Sundays?

Two – Yes, but we do two shows on Sundays. Matinee and evening. *Hamlet* and *A Streetcar Named Desire*.

One – Matinee's *Hamlet*, evening is *Streetcar*, right?

Two – That's just it, I'm not sure anymore.

One – Well now I'm doubting it too.

Two – We're doing so many plays. I'm in thirteen at the moment.

One – I'm in fifteen.

Two – And we know all the lines, down to a T.

One – It's just that, right now, I've got no idea which one we're meant to be doing.

Two – *Hamlet*, or not *Hamlet*?

One – That is the question.

Two – What time is it exactly?

One – No idea. I had a quick nap and my watch stopped.

Two – I left mine at home.

One – But are we doing the matinee or the evening show?

Two – Not a clue... I haven't seen daylight in ages.

One – If it's the evening show, we must have already done one. We should know which.

Two – I'm doing three a day at the moment. One at 3pm, one at 7, and one at 10.

One – Same here. I even do a children's show at 10 in the morning.

We hear the bell that signals to the actors they'll be going onstage shortly.

Two – Too late to ask what play we're doing now. Did you hear the bell? We're on in one minute.

One – But the audience... they know what they came to see.

Two – Of course. So what do we do?

One – Here’s my suggestion. We go on. We do the first two lines of *Hamlet*, and watch the audience’s faces. If they look surprised, we switch to *Streetcar*.

Two – You think...?

One – Let’s give it a shot.

Two – OK.

A pause.

One – Who’s there?

Two – Nay, answer me! Stand and unfold yourself!

A pause.

One – They look surprised, don’t they?

Two – OK. Let’s switch to *A Streetcar Named Desire*...

One – Let’s go back to the beginning and pick it up from there, alright?

Two – OK.

A pause.

One – Who’s there?

Two – Nay, answer me! Stand and unfold yourself!

One – Hey there, Stella, baby!

Two – Don't holler at me like that. Hi, Mitch.

A pause.

One – Yeah, it flows quite well.

Two – It could work.

One – And if they still look surprised?

Two – I don’t know.

One – We could alternate the lines.

Two – Alternate the lines?

One – One line from *Hamlet*, one line from *Streetcar*, and so on.

Two – We can try.

A pause.

One – Who’s there?

Two – Hey there, Stella, baby!

One – Nay, answer me! Stand and unfold yourself!

Two – Don't holler at me like that. Hi, Mitch.

A pause.

Two – Yeah... But the play's going to be twice as long.

One – Two plays for the price of one. Who's going to complain?

Two – True.

One – And in the evening?

Two – Same thing, but we start with the other play.

One – That'll probably give a whole new meaning to both masterpieces.

Two – We've just invented the theatrical *exquisite corpse*, haven't we?

The bell rings again.

One – This time, we've got to go.

Two – So we're starting with *A Streetcar Named Desire*...

One – Didn't we say *Hamlet*...?

Blackout.

6 – Celebrity Secrets

Two characters (men or women) are facing each other.

One – Thank you for welcoming us into your home. I know how keen you usually are to protect your private life. And thank you for granting this interview to our magazine, *Celebrity Secrets*.

Two – My pleasure...

One – My first question is actually about the press. You've often criticised gossip journalists, comparing them to vultures feeding on the misery of the famous, while violating their privacy.

Two – Even if that's a bit of an exaggeration, I do think actors should be known for the films they've made — not for the more or less sordid details of their private lives, which, frankly, no one's really interested in.

One – Don't be so modest. Our magazine has millions of readers. It seems the private lives of stars fascinate far more people than you might think.

Two – I hate talking about myself. And I've never shared most actors' fondness for exhibitionism. But I understand that sometimes you have to make a few concessions to modesty to satisfy public curiosity.

One – Of course...

Two – I give very few interviews, in fact.

One – Indeed... That's exactly what you told us when we met less than a month ago — on the occasion of your third wedding. To a colleague from broadcast journalism, no less...

Two – Alas, we're already in the process of divorcing.

One – I'm sure we'll have the chance to talk about it again very soon.

Two – It's a painful subject for me, but... with pleasure.

One – Let's turn to the main topic of today's interview — the release of your much-anticipated autobiography, modestly titled... *My Life*.

Two – My publisher wanted to call it *Behind the Glitter*. But I preferred something a little less sensational.

One – That's actually the subtitle of this six-hundred-page masterpiece.

Two – As I said... sometimes you have to compromise.

One – Without giving too much away, you do touch on your intimate life — with a few celebrities who, for a time, shared your bed... Sorry, I mean your life. And there are quite a few. No one is spared...

Two – It feels rather indecent to talk about one's love life. But if I was going to do it, I owed my readers the truth — at the very least.

One – We learn, for instance, that your last wife had one leg shorter than the other, and wore orthopaedic insoles to compensate...

Two – It's important to show people that stars are just like anyone else. Behind the polished images spread by the media are ordinary human beings, with the same flaws as the rest. You know, before they were worshipped as icons, stars were just regular people...

One – Apparently, your wife didn't appreciate being unwillingly turned into a poster child for imperfection, and filed for divorce shortly after that revelation.

Two – Stars are fragile people. They need to be loved. And to be loved, they think they must hide every single flaw. But in truth, it's only by revealing your imperfections that you can truly connect with your audience.

One – And yet, in this book, you don't go into much detail about your own weaknesses.

Two – Out of modesty, believe me.

One – I believe your ex-wife is now preparing her own autobiography. Perhaps, out of respect for your modesty, she'll take it upon herself to reveal the flaws that will help your audience relate to you more deeply.

Two – Perhaps...

One – To finish, I'd like to ask you a slightly cheeky question.

Two – Be my guest...

One – It's well known that most celebrities who publish memoirs hire ghostwriters. Did you actually write this autobiography yourself?

Two – If I didn't know you, I'd take that as an insult... Was there anything in the book that made you doubt I was the author?

One – Not in the book, no. But I happen to know the journalist who actually wrote it very well. I even have his contract in my pocket... Even he did sign it under a pseudonym.

Two – Really... And who do you think that journalist might be?

One – Me.

Two – In that case, congratulations. It's a very well-written book — I thoroughly enjoyed reading it. I even discovered a few anecdotes about my life I didn't know myself, and which — after checking — turned out to be perfectly true.

One – Thank you for giving us this interview.

Two – Thank you.

Blackout.

7 – Scared to Death

One character (man or woman) is there. Another arrives (also gender-neutral).

Two – You look awful... Are you alright?

One – It's the scene where I die...

Two – Sorry?

One – The scene we're about to perform. It's the one where my character dies of a pulmonary embolism.

Two – OK... And has your doctor diagnosed you with a risk of pulmonary embolism? I mean in real life...

One – No. Not that I know of.

Two – So?

One – I don't know... Dying on stage always gets to me. Doesn't it affect you?

Two – No.

One – OK, I'm only pretending, but... What if I actually died for real?

Two – Are you feeling unwell?

One – No, no, I'm fine, but... I feel such a strong connection with my character... What if, in the moment they die, I die with them?

Two – That would be taking your craft a bit far. Even at the Actors Studio, they never expected actors to identify with their characters to the point of dying on cue.

One – I know it's irrational, but I'm scared to death.

Two – Theatre isn't the bloody Colosseum. We don't swap out actors every time someone gets stabbed or eaten by a lion. In theatre, the swords are wooden and the lions are cardboard.

One – You never know... All it takes is once...

Two – Exactly. And this is the fourth show. Your character has already died three times. He dies every night at around ten thirty-five. And yet, here you are.

One – That must be it, then. Fourth show syndrome.

Two – Fourth show syndrome? What's that supposed to be?

One – Molière died after the fourth performance of *The Imaginary Invalid*. And do you know what he died of?

Two – The lung.

One – Exactly. The lung.

Two – Yes, well... we're not in the seventeenth century anymore.

One – You think people don't die of pulmonary embolisms these days?

Two – They do. But at least actors don't get excommunicated anymore. You'll get a proper burial among good Christians.

One – That's a comfort, thanks...

Two – I'm joking. But I didn't know you were so superstitious.

One – I should just stop playing characters who die, that's all.

Two – In every tragedy, the hero dies at the end. Doesn't leave you many options.

One – Then I'll only do comedies.

Two – *The Imaginary Invalid* is a comedy. Argan isn't meant to die in the end. And yet Molière still died playing him.

One – You're right. I'd better give up comedy too.

Two – If you give up tragedy *and* comedy, what's left for you in theatre?

One – Film.

Two – People don't die in films?

One – At least you only die once. In theatre, you die every night.

Two – Even in film, it depends.

One – What do you mean, it depends?

Two – If they get the shot in one take, you only die once. But if they do multiple takes...

One – Right...

Two – If they do four, you could still die on the fourth. Like Molière...

One – I'll try to get it right first time, then.

Two – That's optimistic...

One – I know...

Two – Or there's always television.

One – Television?

Two – On telly, it's low-budget. They can't afford to do lots of takes. Usually the first take is the one they keep.

One – Television? Me? I'd rather die.

The other checks their watch.

Two – Well, perfect timing. That's our cue. Ready?

One – OK...

Blackout.

8 – Background Work

One character (man or woman) dressed in bright colours is there, seemingly waiting for something or someone. Another character (also gender-neutral), dressed in black, arrives carrying a rucksack and a folding chair. They speak to the first.

Two – Is this the place for extras?

One – Yes. Well, I was told to wait here...

Two – OK.

They unfold their chair and sit down. Then they take a thermos of coffee and a foil-wrapped sandwich out of their rucksack. They unwrap the sandwich and start eating. The other watches with curiosity.

One – I'm guessing this isn't your first time as an extra.

Two – I've done this all my life. My parents signed me up to a casting website at birth, to play premature babies.

One – Premature?

Two – I was born three months early.

One – Do they really cast premature babies as extras?

Two – It's rare... But then again, there's not much competition.

One – Got your foot in the door, I suppose.

Two – Then I did adverts for nappies, then cereals, acne creams, mortgages, cosmetic surgery, hearing aids, stairlifts, incontinence pads...

One – From nappies to incontinence pads... now that's what you call coming full circle.

Two – I've just done an ad for funeral plans.

One – Smart move... I guess you have to adapt in this business if you want a long career.

Two – I do telly and film as well, of course.

One – Still as an extra?

Two – Background artist, as they say. I've done a few voiceovers too. But yes – either you see me, or you hear me. Never both at once.

One – And you've never tried to be an actor? I mean, a *real* actor... Playing a role, speaking lines... You know, an actor.

Two – I did, at first. Went to a few auditions. Never got picked. Guess my voice doesn't match my face. So I gave up. Being a proper actor, you know, it's not all good.

One – Oh really?

Two – Once people see and hear you – at the same time, I mean – they start to recognise you, obviously.

One – And for you, that's a bad thing...?

Two – The trouble is, you get typecast. Stuck with the same sort of role forever.

One – I see...

Two – In all the crime dramas, you play the forensic pathologist, for example. It's good to start with – regular work and all that.

One – But after a while, the audience gets bored...

Two – And then no one hires you.

One – Casting directors have no imagination.

Two – Me, you usually only see from the back, or in profile. So naturally, no one recognises me.

One – At least people don't bother you in restaurants asking for autographs.

Two – Even my building manager doesn't recognise me. And I give her a Christmas bonus every year. You didn't recognise me either, for that matter...

One – Have we met?

Two – We crossed paths on the set of that new police drama.

One – Oh yes... The one where that famous weather presenter plays the blind detective.

Two – Blind, but clairvoyant.

One – And you were the forensic pathologist?

Two – I was the bloke the forensic pathologist was autopsying.

One – Sorry, I don't remember you...

Two – What did I tell you... Even my dad doesn't always recognise me.

One – Maybe it's Alzheimer's...

Two – My father didn't recognise me at birth. And frankly, I'm not sure he ever has.
(*Beat*) What about you?

One – Me?

Two – Have you been doing this long?

One – Oh, no, me... This is only my second time. Actually, I'm wondering if I should carry on.

Two – We all say that. Then thirty years later, you're playing a corpse in a funeral insurance ad.

One – Yes... That's kind of why I'm wondering if I shouldn't just stop now.

The other pours coffee from their thermos.

Two – Fancy a coffee?

One – No thanks, I'm good.

The other sips their coffee in silence for a moment.

Two – Yep... You start forming little habits before you even realise it.

One – They say Marilyn Monroe used to knit between takes.

Two – And she was a great actress.

The other looks towards the wings.

One – Ah, I think we're about to start.

Two – When it's time, it's time...

They pack up their things to leave.

One – Do you know what we're doing today? They forgot to tell me.

Two – I figured as much. Otherwise, I imagine you'd have dressed differently.

One – I thought that by wearing bright colours, I might stand out.

Two – Well, in that case, mission accomplished.

One – Oh, yeah...?

Two – We're playing the anonymous crowd at a celebrity's funeral.

The other looks around.

One – So far, it's just the two of us.

Two – It's a low-budget film...

They start to walk off.

Blackout.

9 – Payback

One character (man or woman) is there. Another arrives (also gender-neutral).

One – Hi!

Two – Hi...

One – You're here for the casting?

Two – Yes.

One – It's a great part, isn't it?

Two – Yes.

One – The kind of role that could really reignite a career...

Two – Reignite...? Are you saying that about me?

One – Haven't seen you on screen in a while, have we?

Two – I've mostly been doing theatre lately.

One – And ads! That's right, I saw you in that commercial for stairlifts.

Two – It was for hearing aids.

One – Ah, right. Maybe.

Two – Yeah.

A pause.

One – You really don't remember me?

Two – Should I?

One – We went to the same casting once. Years ago. We were young then.

Two – Oh, yeah?

One – It was for a TV drama. About a bastard who kills his wife for the life insurance, and frames his best mate for the murder.

Two – Oh right. Yes.

One – You got the part. You must've been more convincing than me at playing a bastard.

Two – Yeah.

One – That was the role that launched your career.

Two – It's true.

One – Funny how things turn out, isn't it?

Two – What do you mean?

One – Back then, if I'd got the part instead of you... I might be the star today.

Two – Maybe...

One – A bit of a has-been star, but still.

Two – Thanks... But you know, I don't really believe in luck.

One – No?

Two – Maybe I just had more talent than you. Even back then. That's all.

One – Yeah... Or maybe you were sleeping with the producer.

The other takes the hit.

Two – So... you're here to audition for the lead as well?

One – No.

Two – Supporting role, then?

One – Nope.

Two – Extra?

One – I'm the producer.

The other reels again.

Two – Oh, really?

One – Since I never managed to sleep with a producer to get parts, I decided to become one.

Two – I see...

One – I didn't have the looks to pull it off.

Two – Right.

One – But don't worry – I don't expect actors to sleep with me to get a part.

Two – Good to know.

One – I only cast people with talent, you see.

Two – I see.

One – Though I'm not sure how reassuring that is... for you.

Two – Yeah... I didn't recognise you at first, but... Yeah, I remember now.

One – Oh, yeah?

Two – Paul, isn't it?

One – Peter.

Two – That's it. Peter. But didn't we bump into each other again after that?

One – I gave you my number. But you never called.

Two – Oh, yeah?

One – You borrowed fifty euros off me. For a taxi.

Two – Right... I must've lost your number.

One – No doubt...

Two – Look, I can give it back now if you like.

One – Nah, keep it. It's on me. I don't need it anymore.

Two – You sure?

One – Keep the fifty... Have a drink on me. For old times' sake.

Two – I'll leave you my number. Maybe we could grab that drink together? My treat...

One – See you at the casting.

Two – See you...

Blackout.

10 – Encore

Two characters (men or women) are there, looking perplexed.

One – Do you think we were any good tonight?

Two – They clapped, didn't they?

One – Yes... half-heartedly...

Two – True. A far cry from a standing ovation.

One – The audience got up as one at the end, but... mostly just to leave faster.

Two – There wasn't even a curtain call.

One – True. We came back on stage anyway, but no one applauded.

Two – They were too busy grabbing their coats or climbing over stragglers to get out.

One – If the place had been on fire, they couldn't have left faster.

Two – Maybe we shouldn't have come back on.

One – That fake curtain call was a bit pathetic, to be honest. There we were, bowing like a pair of idiots, while no one was even looking.

A pause.

Two – Did you notice? During the play, they didn't laugh at the bits where they were supposed to.

One – Yeah. And sometimes they laughed when nothing was funny.

Two – Some nights, the audience just has no talent.

One – Last night's were better, weren't they?

Two – Yes, more responsive.

One – Tonight's lot must've come in from the suburbs.

Two – I'd say *far-out* suburbs.

One – That's probably why they were in such a rush to leave. Didn't want to miss the last train.

Two – No, they were truly dreadful tonight.

One – We should be allowed to choose our audience.

Two – The audience gets to choose what they come and see, so why can't we choose who gets to see us?

One – Although... we can't exactly interview every potential spectator before selling them a ticket. We'd never get through them all.

Two – True. And as it is, not that many people come to the theatre these days.

One – Yeah, we can't afford to be picky. We take what we get.

A pause.

Two – Still, I thought they had a certain attentiveness about them, didn't you?

One – Yes. They didn't react much, but you could feel... an attentiveness.

Two – Just because people don't laugh out loud at every line doesn't mean they didn't enjoy the play.

One – Some people are just quieter than others.

Two – And the fewer of them there are, the quieter they seem.

One – Yeah. And there were only about twenty of them.

Two – Seventeen, I think...

One – Well, they were very quiet.

Two – That must be it. They found it funny — they just didn't want to laugh out loud. Out of politeness.

One – You're right. Maybe they loved it, actually.

Two – Yeah. But still, there was no curtain call.

One – No.

Two – And no applause when we came back out anyway.

One – Maybe they didn't see us.

Two – Maybe they didn't want to keep us.

One – In case we had a train to catch.

Two – Actually, that's true – we'd better not hang about or we'll miss ours.

One – We live in the suburbs too, after all.

Two – What actor can afford to live in the city centre these days?

One – In the end, all these suburbanites – they're our audience.

Two – At the very least, they're our neighbours.

One – I think I even recognised one or two.

Two – Nice of them to come.

A pause.

One – Do you think one day we'll be replaced by artificial intelligence?

Two – Who knows... AI's already replaced subtitlers, then voice-over artists – why not actors next?

One – And the day after that... the audience.

Two – Might actually make them more intelligent.

One – And we'll be out of a job.

Two – Robots performing a play in front of other robots.

One – Do you think they'll laugh?

Two – If it's robot humour.

One – What does a robot find funny?

Two – Replacing us, probably. That ought to give them a good laugh.

Blackout.

11 – Quiet on Set!

Two characters (men or women) are there, seemingly waiting. A voice is heard offstage.

Voice off – Quiet on set!

The two characters freeze. They don't say anything for a long moment. The voice is heard again.

Voice off – Quiet on set!

The two remain frozen.

Voice off – Um... Whenever you're ready...

One – What?

Voice off – Well... The camera's rolling... You're not just going to stand there and say nothing, are you?

Two – You said "Quiet on set!"

Voice off – No, I meant everyone *else*.

One – Everyone else?

Voice off – The crew. The technicians. *You're* the actors. You're supposed to say something.

Two – And what do you want us to say?

Voice off – I don't know – your lines, maybe?

One – Our lines...?

Voice off – Don't you have a script?

Two – That's for *you* to tell *us*.

One – We're just the actors. We don't get a say.

Voice off – Hey, I'm just the Director Of Photography. They told me to shoot this scene before midday. Nobody said whether there were any lines.

Two (*to the other actor*) – Did they give you a script?

One – No.

Voice off – Well then... I don't know. Just improvise.

One – Improvise? Improvise *what*?

Voice off – Bloody hell, this is a nightmare...

Two – We're happy to improvise, but we need a starting point. What's the scene supposed to be about?

Voice off – Oh, I've no idea. That's not my job, is it? I just deal with the image.

One – Alright then... We'll improvise.

Voice off – Great. Back to one?

Two – Let's do it.

Voice off – Quiet on set!

The two characters freeze for a moment.

One – What a silence...

Two – Yes.

One – You could hear a pin drop.

Two – Yes.

A pause.

One – Unfortunately, there are no pins.

Two – No.

Another pause.

Voice off – Cut! *(Pause)* Is that it?

One – I'm doing my best...

Two – Yeah, same here.

One – You didn't exactly help, either.

Two – Me?

One – You could've picked it up a bit.

Two – Improvising's a skill, you know. You don't just *become* an improviser overnight.

One – Still, actors are supposed to be able to improvise a little.

Two – So I'm a bad actor now, is that it?

One – I didn't say that, but...

Two – And honestly... "You could hear a pin drop... unfortunately, there are no pins..." What am I supposed to do with *that*?

One – Well, you could've started, if you're so clever!

Two – I *was* about to! You interrupted me...

One – You weren't saying anything!

Two – I was waiting for it to come! That's how improv works. You wait. And silence is important too.

One – Silence?

Two – The unspoken, if you prefer. Dialogue’s important, sure, but it’s the *unspoken* that really counts.

One – The unspoken...

Two – Yes, the unspoken.

One – So... silence, basically.

Two – As someone once said, “Silence after Mozart is still Mozart...”

One – Well then, I’ve nothing more to say...

Silence.

Two – So? How was it this time?

Voice off – What?

One – Our improv.

Two – What improv?

One – The one we just did!

Voice off – Oh, I didn’t film that...

Two – He didn’t film it.

One – You’ve got to be kidding me...

Two – Tell me that’s a joke.

Voice off – Doesn’t matter, we’ll just do it again.

One – But if we do it again, it’s not improvisation anymore!

Voice off – Are you seriously trying to ruin my whole morning? It’s nearly midday! I’ve got other things to do, you know!

Two – Alright then... Let’s go again...

Voice off – Quiet on set!

Silence.

Blackout.

12 – A Murderer’s Face

One character (man or woman) is there, seemingly waiting. Another (man or woman) arrives.

Two – Excuse me, is this the stop for the 118?

One – Yes.

Two – Only... with all the roadworks...

One – No worries, it’s definitely here. I missed the last one by two seconds. But yes, it stopped right here. Don’t worry.

Two – Thanks.

One – You’re welcome.

The second person looks the first with curiosity.

Two – Sorry, but... I feel like I’ve seen you somewhere before.

One – Yes, I get that a lot...

Two – No? Wait — I *do* recognise you...!

One – Oh, really...?

Two – It’s *you*!

One – Me?

Two – That bastard who murdered that poor kid by throwing him off the Ferris wheel! It *was* you!

One – Um, yes... That was in a TV drama. On Channel 4.

Two – Channel 4, that’s it!

They continue to stare insistently.

One – Would you like an autograph?

Two – An autograph? Are you mad, you lunatic!

One – No, I mean — it was just a role. On television. I’ve never actually killed anyone, I promise.

Two – Oh, right... And that poor child?

One – I assure you, no children were harmed during the shoot.

Two – He fell thirty metres and crashed down between the candyfloss stand and the chip van!

One – It was a dummy, I swear! In the end, the kid’s parents collected his fee and took him home to do his homework.

Two – Of course... But just before that, I saw you on Channel 5 in a Nazi uniform torturing a poor woman to get her to reveal where the resistance fighters were hiding.

One – Ah yes, that's true... What can I say? Apparently, I've got the face of a killer.

Two – You *really* do. I honestly don't know what's stopping me from...

They step forward, menacingly.

One – Oi, have you lost it? You do know the war's over, right? The only Nazis left these days don't wear uniforms.

Two – Yeah, yeah... You're going to tell me you vote Labour next.

One – And why not?

Two – Attacking women and children... Don't you have any shame?

They step forward again.

One – It's fiction! Honestly, I'm a pretty decent guy in real life... (*faces them*) Though I wouldn't push myself too far.

The other backs off, cautiously.

Two – What are you going to do, kill me too?

One – I told you — I've never killed anyone! Not yet, anyway...

Two – Still... you *do* look the part.

One – Look the part... That doesn't mean anything! Look at you. You've got a proper idiot's face, and yet...

Two – And yet...?

One – OK, bad example... But plenty of geniuses looked like proper idiots.

Two – Like who?

One – Well, not off the top of my head... but I'm sure there are loads.

Two – Yeah...

One – Have you ever thought about acting?

Two – Acting?

One – Or theatre, maybe. I promise, with a face like yours... You could go far.

Two – What's wrong with my face?

One – Let's just say it's... very expressive.

Two – Oh, really...?

One – Absolutely! (*hands them a business card*) Here — that's the number of the most in-demand casting director in the city right now. He's always on the lookout for fresh faces...

Two – And you think my face would interest him?

One – I'm certain of it! Right now he's looking for someone for *Dinner for Schmucks*, do you know the play?

Two – No.

One – You should audition. Seriously.

Two – Right...

One – Tell them I sent you.

Two – That's kind of you, thanks. And to think I took you for a complete bastard...

One – You see? Just goes to show — appearances can be deceiving.

Blackout.

13 – Original Version

One character (man or woman) is there. Another (also gender-neutral) arrives.

Two – Qu'est-ce qui se passe ?

One – I don't know... (*Pointing at the audience*) Look, there's a crowd gathered. Something must be happening.

Two – Ah oui, vous avez raison... Qu'est-ce qu'ils regardent comme ça ?

One – Who knows... But when lots of people are looking in the same direction, something must be going on.

Two – Et dans quelle direction ils regardent, exactement ?

One – Looks like they're looking... our way.

Two – Alors c'est qu'il se passe quelque chose.

One – But what?

Voice off – Cut!

One – Was something wrong?

Voice off – He's asking if something was wrong...

Two – Oui, qu'est-ce qui ne va pas ?

Voice off – What's wrong is that one of you is dubbed, and the other's in original version.

One – In original version?

Voice off – Without subtitles, too! That's what's wrong!

One – That's right. I didn't even notice...

Two – Moi non plus.

One – Well, I guess we'll have to do it again, then.

Voice off – Quiet on set!

The second character goes to fetch a pile of cards. They replay the same scene with the same lines, but this time the one speaking in French shows cards with English subtitles as they speak. The other continues to speak in English but with a heavy French accent.

Two – Qu'est-ce qui se passe ?

One – I don't know... (*Pointing at the audience*) Look, there's a crowd gathered. Something must be happening.

Two – Ah oui, vous avez raison... Qu'est-ce qu'ils regardent comme ça ?

One – Who knows... But when lots of people are looking in the same direction, something must be going on.

Two – Et dans quelle direction ils regardent, exactement ?

One – Looks like they're looking... our way.

Two – Alors c'est qu'il se passe quelque chose.

One – But what?

Voice off – Cut!

One – What now?

Voice off – He's subtitled, OK, but *you're* still speaking in English!

One – He still speaks English?

Two – Vous êtes sûr?

Voice off – Yes, with an French accent, fine, but it's still English.

One – OK... Let's do it again, then.

Voice off – Quiet on set!

Now the one speaking in English also goes to get a pile of cards. They replay the same scene once again with the same lines, but this time the one speaking English (with an French accent) displays French subtitles.

Two – Qu'est-ce qui se passe ?

One – I don't know... (*Pointing at the audience*) Look, there's a crowd gathered. Something must be happening.

Two – Ah oui, vous avez raison... Qu'est-ce qu'ils regardent comme ça ?

One – Who knows... But when lots of people are looking in the same direction, something must be going on.

Two – Et dans quelle direction ils regardent, exactement ?

One – Looks like they're looking... our way.

Two – Alors c'est qu'il se passe quelque chose.

One – But what?

Voice off – Cut!

Two – Was it alright this time?

Voice off – What?

One – Was it OK this time?

Voice off – Yeah, it'll do... We're not spending all night on it...

Blackout.

14 – You talkin’ to me?

Two characters (men or women) are there, seemingly waiting. They remain silent for a moment.

One – Bloody hell, it’s dragging on.

Two – Yeah.

One – How long have we been waiting?

Two – No idea. They told us to be on set for eight... *(checks watch)* It’s eleven.

One – Three hours! And we haven’t even done a single take.

Two – You’d think three hours would be enough time to get ready.

One – Or they could just have told us to come at noon.

Two – Filmmaking would be a lovely job if it weren’t for the crew...

One – Maybe we should go and ask what’s going on...

Two – Honestly, I wouldn’t.

One – True, they’re ridiculously touchy. You can’t say anything without it sounding like some diva tantrum from a spoiled actor.

Two – So we just have to shut up and wait.

One – Still, at the end of the day, we’re the ones people see on screen.

Two – I sometimes wonder if that’s what they’re punishing us for – waking us up at dawn just to leave us hanging around in a draughty corridor for hours while they get on with their work.

One – If only we could actually *see* them.

Two – Yeah, it’s been ages since they showed their faces. I wonder what they’re even doing.

One – Probably having a snack. You know, workers start early, so by eleven they’re starving...

Two – They say actors are complicated, but truth is, actors spend far more time waiting for the crew than the other way round.

A pause.

One – Actually, I’m getting seriously hungry, aren’t you?

Two – Yeah...

One – There’s food on the table over there. Surely it’s not just for the crew?

Two – No, but... it’s all cold meats and cheese.

One – So?

Two – I’m vegan.

One – Oh, bugger...

Two – Yep... The crew chooses the menu too. And workers eat cold meats.

A pause.

One – Can I ask you something?

Two – You see, this is what I dread most about standing around on set for hours before the director finally decides to call “action”...

One – What?

Two – It always ends with existential questions.

One – Sorry...

Two – Go on, ask your question.

One – When you play a role, do you actually become the character in your head, or do you just say the lines and pose while thinking about what you’ll have for lunch?

Two – OK, so... Stanislavski or Brecht, is that it?

One – Um... yeah, if you like...

Two – I’m more of a Diderot type, you know.

One – Diderot?

Two – *The Paradox of the Actor*, haven’t you read it?

One – No.

Two – According to Diderot, an actor shouldn’t identify with the character they’re playing. Their job isn’t to *feel* the emotions, but to *make the audience* feel them.

One – Right...

Two – So if you’re playing anger, you don’t need to *be* angry. You just convincingly replicate the signs of anger.

One – Got it.

Two – Basically the opposite of the Method, or Actors Studio, if you prefer.

One – I see.

Two – Do you, though?

One – Yeah, yeah, it’s... it’s clear.

Two – You know that scene in *Taxi Driver*, when De Niro’s practising being tough in front of the mirror?

One – *You talkin’ to me?*

Two – Well, in that scene, De Niro – or rather his character – is trying to imitate anger, to look tough for an imaginary threat.

One – But De Niro trained at the Actors Studio, didn’t he?

Two – He did, but in that particular scene, De Niro is playing a character who is himself trying – badly – to act. It's a kind of mise en abyme. When he's playing the taxi driver, he uses the Method. But when the character tries to play a hard man, he's copying a cliché of what a hard man looks like.

One – And that's not a bad thing?

Two – Not if it's done with intention. But if it's just laughably over the top, yes. Still, you can absolutely act angry without *being* angry. It's often more convincing. And it's definitely less exhausting in the long run.

One – That's true...

Two – And you? Are you more Method, or more Diderot?

One – Me, I'm completely into the role. I *am* the character, you know? I don't act the part — I *am* the part.

Two – Right...

One – You don't think that's the right approach?

Two – No, no, I mean... why not. But... it does worry me a little. Since in the scene we're about to film together, you're playing a violent copper and I'm the poor sod he's interrogating...

One – Ah, I think it's our turn now.

Two – Well... maybe just try to keep a bit of distance from your character, yeah? (*The other, already deep into the role, doesn't seem to hear.*) Are you listening to me?

One – You talkin' to me?

Blackout.

15 – Final Cut

Two characters (men or women) face each other. They remain silent for a moment.

One – I’m afraid it’s time for us to say goodbye...

Two – Oh, let’s not get sentimental. We both knew this moment would come.

One – Still, it means something to me.

Two – You’ll forget me soon enough, you’ll see.

One – Your bust is in the Musée Grévin – how could I possibly forget you?

Two – There are plenty of museums in Paris. Just avoid that one. Who goes to the Musée Grévin nowadays anyway? Tourists, maybe...

One – Paris has become one big open-air wax museum, filled with dusty monuments and waxy-faced extras.

Two – There aren’t even any real Parisians left. They’ve all sold their flats and turned them into Airbnbs.

One – Paris is no longer a party... Now it’s just a backdrop for selfies.

Two – Shall we take one last selfie?

One – Alright...

They turn their backs to the audience to take a selfie.

Voice off – And... cut! That was the final scene of Jean-Paul Ramirez.

Applause.

Two – Thank you.

One – I heard this was your final film too.

Two – You have to know when to stop. Better not to do that one film too many.

One – Not everyone has your wisdom, sadly.

Two – I’ve spent most of my life in front of a camera. I’d like to have a bit of time to experience life too.

One – You might be disappointed. You know what Alfred Hitchcock said...

Two – “Cinema is life with the boring bits cut out.”

One – For the audience, maybe. But for us actors...

Two – True. To make a two-hour film, the editor sometimes watches over a hundred hours of rushes. And cuts everything that doesn’t move the story forward.

One – But we still had to shoot those hundred hours.

Two – Not to mention all the time we spend waiting around between scenes.

One – You know Marilyn Monroe used to knit between takes?

Two – I think that was Brigitte Bardot.

One – Oh yes, maybe...

Two – I believe Marilyn Monroe did crosswords.

One – Marilyn Monroe...?

Two – Or Liz Taylor, I'm not sure anymore.

One – Anyway, all actors get bored stiff between takes.

Two – Yes.

One – And let's not even talk about the time we spend waiting between films.

Two – I once went two years without working.

One – Two years waiting for the phone to ring.

A pause.

Two – I heard that in wildlife documentaries, they sometimes shoot 500 hours for one hour of footage.

One – Poor animals.

Two – Do you think they're asked to do multiple takes?

One – Anyway, for you, it's over now.

Two – Yes... Time for me to reflect on all those scenes that were cut in editing. The ones that make up most of my cinematic career.

One – In other words, you're going to be bored out of your mind.

Two – Thank you for your kind words.

A pause.

One – The film's over, isn't it?

Two – Then what exactly are we waiting for?

One – Nothing...

Two – Habit...

They prepare to leave.

Voice off – I'm really sorry, but we've had a slight technical issue.

One – Right...

Two – So...?

Voice off – We're going to have to do it again.

One – Well then — looks like retirement's not quite here yet after all.

Voice off – Whenever you're ready...

Two – I'm ready.

Voice off – Quiet on set!

One – I'm afraid it's time for us to say goodbye...

Blackout.

The End

About the author

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

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

Other plays by the same author translated in English

Comedies for 2

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

Comedies for 3

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

Comedies for 4

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

Comedies for 5 to 6

All's well that starts badly
Christmas Eve at the Police Station
Crisis and Punishment
Critical but Stable
In lieu of flowers...
King of Fools
Traffic Jam on Graveyard Lane

Comedies for 7 or more

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

Collection of sketches

Enough is Enough
Ethan and Eve
For real and for fun
Him and Her
Killer Sketches
Lost time Chronicles
Open Hearts
Sidewalk Chronicles
Stage Briefs
Stories to die for

Monologues

Happy Dogs
Like a fish in the air

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