

The Revolutionists



About the Show

What is 'Meta Theatre'?

By Lea Herman

"Metatheater. The idea is to be a little confusing."

According to its full title, *The Revolutionists* is "A Comedy. A Quartet. A Revolutionary Dream Fugue." The drama unfolds on at least three different fictional levels corresponding with each other. That sounds way too complicated to be entertaining. Or does it?

First, the plot is simple: Olympe de Gouges is writing a play about the French Revolution with herself, Marie Antoinette, Charlotte Corday and Marianne as protagonists. On a second level, we are watching a play about these four women during the Revolution. On a third level, the plot unrolls in retrospect. Lauren Gunderson writes: "In the end, the entire play is in Olympe's mind as she walks up the stairs, onto the scaffold, and to her death." The actual drama is an inner monologue of Olympe coming to terms with her own execution, and the four protagonists only meet in the interior world of their writer's imagination.

That makes it metatheater— a form of theater that exposes and comments on its narrative strategies instead of disguising them. The protagonists challenge the fourth wall and are aware that they are characters in a play. They are not trying to hide it or to take themselves too seriously. On the contrary, they play around with all kinds of different theater styles.

The characters come to represent different archetypes of womanhood. Marie, the queen, demonstrates strength, grace and countenance in the face of the ultimate catastrophe of losing her identity, her social status, her family, her life. Corday, the angel of assassins, is a righteous girl determined to act for a cause greater than herself. Marianne, a single mother and practical activist, fights for freedom beyond race and gender with the wisdom of the heart. Finally, Olympe, the writer, struggles to get out of her head and onto paper what is really important to her, because she knows how words create truth.

That is where the true story lies: in the search for a voice that succeeds at moving and empowering the minds, hearts and spirits of her listeners without being sentimental. A voice that matters politically, emotionally, and historically. A voice that still speaks of true freedom for all, regardless of our various backgrounds, in the reality of the 21st century. And lastly, a voice that refuses to be forgotten.

Who's who – Historical Figures in the Play

Olympe de Gouges (1748-1793), born Marie Gouze, was a writer and political activist. Married at 16 to a man she did not love, she became a mother and a widow at 17. She then moved to Paris, lived in a romantic relationship without marrying again, and started her own theater company. Her 1791 *Declaration of the Rights of Woman and the Female Citizen* pointed out that the revolutionary concept of equality did not include women or people of color. Politically favoring the concept of a constitutional monarchy based on human rights, she harshly criticized the Reign of Terror.

Marie-Anne Charlotte de Corday d'Armont (1768-1793) wrote history by stabbing the Jacobin leader and journalist Jean-Paul Marat in his bathtub, hoping that his death would end the Reign of Terror and prevent a civil war. In July 1793 she came to Paris, took a hotel room, bought a 6 inch long kitchen knife and wrote her *Address to the French people, friends of Law and Peace*. Three days later, she executed her plan. After her execution, a man in the crowd jumped up onto the scaffold and slapped her severed head, which, as the anecdote goes, was still conscious and reacted with a facial expression of surprise and indignation.

Marie Antoinette (1755-1793) was born Archduchess of Austria and married to the Dauphin at age 14. Disliked by the people, she was held solely responsible for the state bankruptcy due to her lavish spending on fashion, theater and music. She was known as *Madame Déficit*, *L'Autruche* (the ostrich) and as *L'Autrichienne* (the Austrian bitch). 1792, the royal family were imprisoned and the monarchy was abolished. One year later Marie Antoinette was accused of high treason and executed.

Marianne Angelle is the only purely fictional character in the play, but she is based on two historical references - *La Marianne* and the Haitian Revolution. *La Marianne* is the female allegory of the French Republic and its founding principles *liberté, égalité, & fraternité*. Secondly, in 1791 the Caribbean colony of Sainte-Domingue initiated the first successful anti-slavery and anti-colonial revolution, ending in 1804 with the abolition of slavery on the island and the founding of the independent Republic of Haiti. Marianne, the only character in the play who lives, points towards a future left to attain: a state in which "freedom for all" is possible, regardless of race, gender and social status.

Madame La Guillotine

“A woman has the right to mount the scaffold; she must also have the right to mount the rostrum.”

Olympe de Gouges wrote this phrase in 1791, when the guillotine took center stage as the symbol of a new era, promoting the ideals of liberty and equality among members of a society searching for a new identity. For the new order of the French Republic to arise, a literal clean cut had to be made with the past, and the merciless efficiency of the guillotine seemed to be the perfect vehicle to transport this new civilian spirit. Originally developed by the humanist and opponent to the death penalty, Dr. Joseph Ignace Guillotin, the progressive apparatus was supposed to make decapitation faster to execute, therefore more humane and, at the same time, more egalitarian. Facing the oblique blade of Madame la Guillotine, everyone was truly equal. People were exposed in their purest human condition regardless of their social rank, wearing a simple collarless shirt or, in the case of the denounced ‘enemies of the people,’ a symbolical red bib, their hair cut short at the neck so it would not impede the execution process.

There was no doubt a theatrical quality to public beheadings. Ironically, for Olympe de Gouges and her compatriots Charlotte Corday and Marie Antoinette, as well as for many others, the scaffold itself provided the rostrum and therefore the uncensored attention they were seeking to speak up one last time about their political and personal convictions. “I killed one man to save a 100,000!” were Corday’s last words. “Children of the Fatherland, you will avenge my death!” was de Gouges’ farewell. When Marie Antoinette mounted the scaffold, she involuntarily stepped on the executioner’s foot. Turning around, she said to him, “Sorry, I didn’t mean to ...” which should remain her last public speech.

Possibly, ‘gallows humor’ functioned as a psychological catalyst to the scarcities of everyday life in revolutionary Paris. Food stands and souvenir shops around the central *Place de la Révolution* where the beheadings took place were daily frequented by a huge crowd. Miniature guillotines were a popular children’s toy. “It takes a terrifying spectacle to hold the people in check,” stated Tuaut de La Bouverie, Representative of the People and a partisan of regular public executions. This so-called Reign of Terror was intentionally induced by a revolutionary brotherhood – fraternité – of radical republicans and anti-monarchists. The possibility of being publicly proscribed and consequently executed turned the people into fear-ridden enemies of each other. This effectively dispersed any counterrevolutionary effort and suppressed further political dialogue, the base of any functioning democracy, for the benefit of the Revolutionary Tribunal’s radical control. Counter-revolutionary efforts included alternative, more moderate approaches, such as the political propositions of Olympe de Gouges.

Hence, the guillotine can be called a most effective disciplinary tool of governmental terror. A powerful symbol of the constant threat of losing one’s head for speaking up in the 18th century, the guillotine can almost be regarded as another character in this production of *The Revolutionists*.

In our post-revolutionary age the lack of freedom of speech, of equality, and the lack of humanism in favor of a mechanistic worldview might be more subtle and harder to recognize, but the spreading of fear as a governmental instrument is surely not outdated. The story of Madame La Guillotine and the Reign of Terror also point at the downside of this strategy: In a society reigned by fear, there is no more clear delineation possible between the accuser and the accused, the victim, the spectator, or the protagonist. Anyone could be next.

About the Playwright



Lauren M. Gunderson is a prolific playwright, screenwriter and short story author originally from Atlanta, Georgia. She was announced the most-produced living playwright in the United States in both 2016 and 2017 by American Theatre Magazine.

Awards include the 2016 Lanford Wilson Award from the Dramatist Guild, the 2016 Otis Guernsey Award for Emerging Writer, and the prestigious 2014 Steinberg/ATCA New Play Award for *I and You*. She was also a Susan Smith Blackburn and John Gassner Playwriting Award finalist.

Lauren is a recipient of the Mellon Foundation's 3-year residency with the Marin Theatre Company. Her work has been commissioned, produced and developed at companies across the United States including the South Coast Rep (*Emilie*, *Silent Sky*), The Kennedy Center (*The Amazing Adventures of Dr. Wonderful and Her Dog!*), the Oregon Shakespeare Festival, The O'Neill, The Denver Center, San Francisco Playhouse, Marin Theatre, Berkeley Rep, Shotgun Players, and more.

Lauren co-authored *Miss Bennet: Christmas at Pemberley* with Margot Melcon, one of the most produced plays in America in 2017. Her work is published at Playscripts (*I and You*, *Exit Pursued by A Bear*, *The Taming*, and *Toil And Trouble*), Dramatists (*The Revolutionists*, *The Book of Will*, *Silent Sky*, *Bauer*, *Miss Bennet*) and Samuel French (*Emilie*). Lauren's picture book *Dr Wonderful: Blast Off to the Moon* will be released by Two Lions/Amazon in May 2017.

One main focus of Lauren Gunderson's work highlights women in science and history; she has made several of her plays available to activists. In April 2018, she created a national campaign of theater activism with royalty-free readings of her play *Natural Shocks* to address domestic and gun violence against women.

Lauren Gunderson currently lives with her family in San Francisco.

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