

The Revolutionists Synopsis

Picture this: A playwright named Olympe (Olympe de Gouges, a feminist playwright) sits at her writing desk, trying to come up with the definitive stage piece that captures the revolution but an improbable group of women just keeps barging in demanding she write something important for them.

In comes a black woman named Marianne (a composite character representing women opposing the French in Haiti) to see what Olympe is working on, and to seek a well-written declaration for her own cause.

But Olympe's too busy trying to create a play. "I want to challenge audiences... really push them," explains Olympe. "This is our time to make a better world for everyone... who sees my plays." Responds Marianne: "You're always so close to selflessness."

Soon enough, there's a knock at the door, and in walks Charlotte (Charlotte Corday, a French activist). She says she needs a really good exit line because she's about to kill the journalist Jean-Paul Marat, whom she holds responsible for many deaths so far in the revolutionary violence. "My actions will be talked about for centuries and I don't want to sound like a dingbat," Charlotte says.

Those demands on the playwright would be enough—and then the deposed queen, Marie Antoinette, shows up. "I'm here for a rewrite," she tells Olympe. She needs better press. [Marie was an exemplary mother and generously adopted additional children, yet all people remember is her famous quote.]

What's a poor playwright to do? The answer comes in Gunderson's play, in which these modern-talking women prod, tease and comfort each other as the guillotine outside the door falls repeatedly through the days and the lofty ideals of the revolution vanish in pools of blood.