

# The New Criterion

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## Scenes from “The man of terror”

by Glyn Maxwell

*Excerpts from Glyn Maxwell's adaptation of Anatole France's Les Dieux Ont Soif.*

**T**he *Man of Terror* is adapted from the novel *Les Dieux Ont Soif* (“The Gods Will Have Blood”), published in 1912 by Anatole France. It tells the story of Evariste Gamelin, a struggling painter and ardent supporter of the Revolution, whose meteoric rise and fall parallels that of Robespierre—the radical egalitarian who in 1789 opposed the death penalty, but would preside as a virtual dictator over the carnage of The Terror. Evariste, in his turn, develops from a young idealist into a fanatical magistrate, sending hundreds to die without trial.

One has never had far to look to find high principles—whether liberty, or democracy, or God—being distorted and exploited by those in power: that much stays news. But the danger one faces in writing a play whose central character is a man who by any standards does violent harm, is to damn him without scrutiny: I fought over several drafts of this play to get nearer to Evariste until I felt I could truly make his case for terror. When I understood that his case for terror is firmly based upon concepts my culture takes utterly for granted—justice, equality, freedom—I not only found a voice for him, but I started to see his kind everywhere, drawing a line through the world, dividing the virtuous from the damned, the with-us from the against-us, and I sensed how intoxicating it must be to think oneself on the side of truth forever. And somewhere hazily visible through streams of blood is the angelic scribble of the Declaration of the Rights of Man.

As the play begins, it is April 1793. France is ruled by the Committee of Public Safety, dominated by Robespierre. Louis XVI was executed in January; Marie-Antoinette is in prison. —*Glyn Maxwell*

*from Act I*

*A group of friends are having a picnic on a meadow outside Paris. Rose Clebert is an actress learning her lines for Pamela, a play Evariste regards as decadent.*

ROSE: I'm sure Monsieur Gamelin  
has work to do in the meadow ...

EVARISTE:

Not at all,  
we're on holiday. Hooray. Shall we do handstands?

ROSE: Do what you like, express yourself, fly a kite,  
I've lines to learn, I've twelve whole lines to learn.

EVARISTE: *Pamela* ...

ROSE: *Pamela*. Yep. Do you know it?

EVARISTE: I know of its content.

ROSE: Right. So you don't know it.  
Everyone knows of its content.

EVARISTE: Everyone knows  
it's meant to inspire nostalgia for a world  
we've left behind.

ROSE: You mean it's got dukes in it.

EVARISTE: Sister Rose —

ROSE: Could you not call me that.

EVARISTE: "The freedom to do everything that injures  
no one else."

ROSE: What is this, nursery school?

EVARISTE: Do you not believe affection for a world  
of aristocrats, at a time of war with tyrants,  
might be —

ROSE: Philippe and I  
were playing this game at lunch, I think you lose  
a point for talking politics, five points  
for mentioning the war. You've lost so many  
the flowers are dying.

EVARISTE: Ah, but I don't lose points  
if I don't observe the game.

ROSE: That's very true,  
the voice of the Committee, very true.

EVARISTE: Nothing's very true. It's either true  
or false. It's right or wrong. It's good or evil.

ROSE: What's that, a philosophy?

EVARISTE: Look it's not a game.  
To have destroyed a king.

ROSE: Oh and he's ten points,  
I forgot to say.

EVARISTE: Laid waste a tyranny.

ROSE: I'm a Parisienne, Monsieur Gamelin,  
I don't need to be told there've been some changes.

EVARISTE:

Now every man has value.

ROSE:                   Meanwhile, women—

EVARISTE: Every citizen, woman, child, has value.

ROSE: I believed that anyway.

EVARISTE:               I believed that  
anyway. There was, however, Sister,  
never before a Nation that enshrined it  
as a principle.

ROSE:               America.

EVARISTE:               A new world  
in a wilderness. But we have made the old world  
young again.

ROSE:               If the world's so very young  
it'll scream until it's fed.

EVARISTE:           Aren't you glad?  
Do you regret what's gone? Is that the reason  
you dress up every night and say twelve lines  
no one will ever say again?

ROSE:               I'm glad,  
Monsieur Gamelin, that I'm alive,  
and I love what work I have. It's all I'd wish  
on anyone. Now I wish to learn these lines  
no one will ever say, so I can say them.

### *from Act IV*

*Marat (known as "The People's Friend") has been assassinated. Evariste—now a powerful magistrate—tells his young wife Elodie that today he condemned to death a hussar named Maubel. Evariste believes (wrongly) that Maubel was once Elodie's lover. "Prodigy" is the nickname of their friend Philippe, who really was once Elodie's lover—a fact of which Evariste is ignorant.*

ELODIE: They killed him, why did they do it, why did they kill him?  
He was the People's Friend!

EVARISTE:               Because they were free,  
because we allowed the license of free speech  
to men who pleaded for the tyrant's life,  
and for the Austrian whore—

ELODIE:               She doesn't deserve  
life!

EVARISTE:           Nor will she have it  
many moments longer.

ELODIE: She's a traitor!

EVARISTE: We let them have the floor, when half their number  
had fled the country to conspire against us.  
Marat has paid the price, the very threat  
he warned us of. The time for doubt is past,  
indulgence, mercy, shadows cast by truth.  
A Captain Maubel was condemned to death  
this afternoon. I saw him catch my eye.  
I don't believe I knew him. He was a captain  
in the hussars.

ELODIE: Maubel ...

EVARISTE: That's right, a handsome man, he stared at me.  
He was a spy for England.

ELODIE: But he's gone now,  
Evariste, you saw through his little scheme.

EVARISTE: I saw through everything he had ever done.

ELODIE: A spy without a secret ... I can hear the rain,  
I can hear the rain he doesn't know is falling,  
he doesn't know will ever fall again,  
that man, that captain,  
you were his only hope and you looked past him  
into the light. Now you're *my* only hope.  
I'm helpless—

EVARISTE: You are alone.

ELODIE: I have to kneel  
before you, I'm on trial, my every word  
is weighed in your cold mind.

EVARISTE: The trial is long,  
hangs in the balance.

ELODIE: My heart beats on the door:  
spare her!

EVARISTE: But I'll hear no witnesses.  
I alone shall judge.

ELODIE: My breath is held  
like water in your hands.

EVARISTE: I may be thirsty,  
I may soon wish to drink.

ELODIE: And I'll be spilt  
like blood if you require it.

EVARISTE: This is the cart

that takes you to the place.

ELODIE: They cut my hair,  
they tie my hands, the crowds are gathering.  
I'm trying to think of my last words!

EVARISTE: Your feet  
are climbing up the scaffold.

ELODIE: Is there something,  
anything, that can help me, is there a name  
I can say, of a nameless one, of an Enemy  
of Virtue, can I serve the Nation as I die?

EVARISTE: Thump, they lay you face down on a board.

ELODIE: For I've never known a captain of hussars ...

EVARISTE: Thump, they roll you in and lock the clasp.

ELODIE: I knew a man, but he was not a soldier ...

EVARISTE: Thump, and your last word ... ?

ELODIE: *Prodigy.*

## *from Act V*

*Evariste justifies the Terror to the People.*

EVARISTE: In the old days of the Tyranny, four hundred  
thousand thrown in dungeons, cruel and capricious  
torture, fifteen thousand  
hanged, three thousand broken on the wheel,  
while the Revolution dithers to preserve  
its own life by removing a few hundred  
traitors and criminals? We create a world  
of freedom and justice, yet we hesitate  
to save it? Universal suffrage!  
Welfare assistance for the poor and needy!  
Education for all! The end of slavery!  
This is our Constitution!  
In Pennsylvania, how they rang the bells  
for freedom while the negro sat in chains!  
But his black cousins sit in our Assembly.  
A new free world, and yet you hesitate  
to save it? You say stop the guillotine?  
Then stop the Revolution. We must terrify!  
To save this world from the tyrannies we conquered  
at the Bastille, my friends, on the battlefields,

we must terrify! To break conspiracies  
we must terrify! To counter false compassion  
we must terrify! There is a world-to-come  
of justice and equality and freedom,  
whose citizens will barely know the words,  
unable to conceive of life without them,  
but they dangle by a thread. And I assure you,  
the very second France is out of danger,  
this Terror will be over. Then our laws  
will be what we imagined in our dreams,  
and, to the virtuous man, invisible.

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**Glyn Maxwell** is the author of a new collection of poems, *Pluto* (Picador).

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