

PLAGUE

Translated and adapted by

Colin Duckworth

from

Albert Camus' novel

LA PESTE

Translation and adaptation copyright © Colin Duckworth 2006
Registered with the Australian Writers' Guild
No: 10208

PLAGUE

translated and adapted from Albert Camus' *La Peste*

by Colin Duckworth

For three (or more) male actors

Apart from Actor 1 (Rieux), the cast must be able to play several parts with varied voices and accents, and minimal costume-changes in full view of the audience. (The twelve characters, apart from Rieux, may be played by more than two actors if desired.)

ACTOR 1

Dr. Bernard Rieux, narrator and central character: about 35, walks briskly, medium height, broad shoulders, sun-tanned, dark hair. Never wears a hat. Speaks in a matter-of-fact way – clinical. But gets very roused once!

ACTOR 2

Michel: the concierge. 50s and (at the start) hale and hearty.

Dr. Picard: about 50, rather pompous and ineffectual.

First Ordinary Bloke .

Jean Tarrou: 40s. Newcomer to Oran. A philosopher who aspires to be “a saint without God”.

Voice of newsvendor.

ACTOR 3

Father Paneloux: A learned, militant, harsh Jesuit priest. Wears steel-rimmed glasses and a large crucifix.

Michel's son: late 20s. anxious and nervous.

Othon: Judge. In his 40s. Has a small son.

Joseph Grand: a meek, middle-aged, needy town hall clerk with private dreams.

Rambert: a young, confident Parisian journalist. Pleasant, good-looking. Has a wife in Paris.

Second Ordinary Bloke.

Dr. Castel: elderly, blunt, very experienced and clear-sighted.

Cottard: a plump little spiv with a past.

PLAGUE

Translated and adapted from Camus' *La Peste* by Colin Duckworth

Sc. 1

Sounds of traditional Arab music, followed by crowd rejoicing and cheering. An out-of-tune brass band starts up and drowns the Arab music.

Rambert is standing looking front with a 1940s-style microphone in his hand. It is obvious from the way he speaks that he is used to broadcasting.

RAMBERT Bonsoir, chers auditeurs. This is Jacques Rambert talking to you direct from the mayor's office overlooking the main square in Oran in Algeria. Oran has been French since 1831— it's the most European of all north African cities. For the last few months this colonial town has been in a state of siege. You wouldn't think it possible these days, in the late 1940s, for a whole population to be completely cut off from the outside world, but that's the way it's been. We've all been imprisoned inside these forbidding grey stone walls, and the city gates have been locked and barred, not to keep an invader out — Spaniards, Moors or Turks, as in the past — but to keep **us in**. You ask why? To stop the bubonic plague getting out.

But today is Liberation Day, as you can hear. Like the day the city was taken by the Allies in 1942. You hear it? (*He turns the microphone towards front. The crowd noises increase. He turns mic back. Sounds diminish.*) The square below me is festooned with buntings and flags, a colourful scene, a milling crowd of excited citizens, waving, dancing and singing, children and dogs running about. It's a celebration, not another revolution! Why a celebration? Because it's all over at last. Finished. A dark shadow has been lifted from this city. Yes, the plague has gone, as mysteriously as it arrived all those months ago.

(Rieux walks on and stands beside Rambert.)

The person who knows what happened better than anyone else is Dr Bernard Rieux.

Dr Rieux, you must be feeling very relieved now things are back to normal.

RIEUX (*into mic*) Normal? Well, I don't know about that. The plague has changed most of us for ever. Including you, I imagine. Living cheek by jowl, night and day, with pure cruel and mindless evil, leaves quite an impression.

Pause.

RAMBERT. And now it's over, and everybody is happy!

RIEUX. Oh no, my friend, not everybody! The rats are happy! They're scurrying about again behind walls and under floors, not dying in their tracks with bleeding mouths, the way they were all those months ago when the terror began.

Rambert goes off. LIGHTING CHANGE.

Sc.2

MICHEL the concierge enters, sits, starts reading newspaper. He looks strong and healthy. RIEUX picks up his doctor's bag wearily, and approaches him.

MICHEL Good evening, Dr. Rieux. There's a telegram for you.

RIEUX Thank you, Michel. It's from my wife, I expect.

MICHEL You will be missing her already.

RIEUX Yes, of course. Ah well, The mountains will be good for her cough. Oran isn't a good place to be ill in, you know, with the heat of summer coming on. (*He starts to go.*) By the way, Michel, have you seen any more rats?

MICHEL Have I just! Three! Some bastard had left them in the first floor corridor for me to clean up. Covered with blood, they were, must have been taken out of traps and left there. If I catch those jokers...

RIEUX I don't think it's a joke, Michel. I've just finished my rounds in the slums, and there were lots of rats on the rubbish dumps. All dead.

MICHEL There's something very odd going on, doctor.

Michel shuffles off, mumbling to himself.

Sc. 3

Rieux turns to audience.

RIEUX Oran is a dull, featureless, modern, ugly town, on the coast of Algeria, a French colony. There are no trees, no gardens, no pigeons. In the burning summer we live behind closed shutters, in autumn it's all rain and mud. Only in winter do we have any fine days.

You can see life's pretty boring in 1940s Oran, So the townspeople have developed certain routines to make it bearable. They work hard, but solely to make money. During the week they do *business*, and at weekends they make love, go to the cinema, lose money at cards, and swim in the sea — which the town has unfortunately turned its back on. In other words, they're pretty normal folk.

It's not a good thing to be ill in Oran. What with the extreme climate and the uncaring materialism of the citizens, it's an uncomfortable place to die in. Dying is a lonely business in this hot, dry, soulless place. But I mustn't be unfair. Oran is peaceful and orderly, our people are open, friendly and energetic, and the countryside is beautiful.

Small wonder, then, that we were totally unprepared for the events that began last April, when the rats started to die.

Sc. 4

Rieux's surgery. He sits at his desk. ENTER Raymond Rambert, a young, confident journalist.

RAMBERT Thank you for seeing me, doctor. My name is Rambert, Raymond Rambert. I'll come straight to the point. I'm a journalist. A major Paris newspaper has commissioned me to report on the living conditions of the Arabs.

RIEUX The Arabs?

RAMBERT Yes. Especially their state of health.

RIEUX That is far from good. But before I go any further, tell me, are you free to write the truth?

RAMBERT Certainly.

RIEUX. I mean, can you write a totally adverse report?

RAMBERT Totally? Well, no. But there wouldn't be any grounds for totally damning criticism, would there?

RIEUX No, there wouldn't. But I can't be party to a report unless it's written without reservations. I'm too world-weary, you see, to agree to compromise.

RAMBERT I think I see where you're coming from. I'm sorry to have bothered you. *(He gets up to leave.)*

RIEUX Thank you for taking it like that. *(Stands to show Rambert out.)* However, there is something curious going on that you might like to write about. There are a large number of dead rats appearing in the town recently.

RAMBERT Ah, now that *is* interesting! How many rats? (*He begins to take notes.*)

RIEUX Attics, cellars, dustbins, gutters, they're all full of them. The town council has finally got off its arse — don't print that! — and has ordered the Pest Control people to collect the rats and incinerate them at dawn every day. They carted away hundreds of them from just one factory this morning, and their own offices had fifty. You *can* print that!

(Rambert laughs and goes off. Rieux looks offstage.)

RIEUX *(out to audience)* Oh dear, here's the Judge coming to see me — Judge Othon. Looking more than ever like a cross between an undertaker and what used to be called a man of quality.

Sc. 5

Judge Othon enters

OTHON Good afternoon, doctor Rieux.

RIEUX How do you do, Judge. How is Philippe?

OTHON My son is doing very well. We're very proud of him.

RIEUX He's a fine little boy. And Madame Othon?

OTHON I think she's well, thank you. I am just off to the station to collect her. She's been to visit my parents.

RIEUX Well, well! How curious. My wife has gone away because of her health, and my mother has just come to Oran to look after me!

OTHON Indeed? Tell me, what about these rats, doctor? I've just seen a street cleaner carrying a box full of them.

RIEUX *(reassuring himself above all)* Oh... It will be all right.

Judge Othon goes off.

Sc. 6

Rieux faces the audience.

RIEUX It wasn't all right though. The situation grew worse during the days that followed. At night you couldn't walk along a pavement or the promenade without

squashing a dead or dying rat under foot. It was as if the very soil beneath our houses was exuding boils and abscesses that had always been lying dormant under the surface.

On the 25th of April, 6,231 dead rats were collected and incinerated. On the 28th the count went up to 8,000. At last people began to realise that they were faced not just with an inconvenience, but with a real, incalculable threat. Better-off folk talked of moving out to their holiday houses by the sea.

But the very next day, only a small number of rodents were picked up, and to everyone's relief Pest Control announced that the crisis was over. At lunchtime, as I was just getting out of my car, I was met by Father Paneloux.

Sc.7

Michel sits down on a bench upstage. He is breathing heavily and painfully.

ENTER Father Paneloux, the Jesuit priest. He wears small round glasses, and a large crucifix on his chest.

PANELOUX Ah, doctor, I'm glad you are back. Can you come and have a look at Michel, the concierge?

RIEUX Yes, of course, Father. What's wrong with him?

PANELOUX He wanted to go for a walk but he couldn't manage it by himself. He said he had pains in his armpits, his neck, and his groin.

RIEUX *(moves upstage to Michel).* This is no good, Michel. What seems to be the matter?

MICHEL I don't know, doctor. It must be the 'flu or something.

RIEUX *(Feels the back of Michel's neck.)* You've got a bit of a lump there. I'll just take your temperature. *(He does so — orally! His expression makes it clear Michel has a fever.)* You'd better go to bed, and I'll drop in to see you this afternoon.

MICHEL Yes, doctor. Thank you your help, Father. *(He lies down on a bench upstage. Rieux and Paneloux converse downstage.)*

RIEUX What do you make of all these rats, Father?

PANELOUX *(smiling, as if enjoying a private joke).* Oh, maybe we are having an epidemic visited upon us! In which case, we shall have deserved it. *(Exit. Rieux stands still, deep in thought.)*

We hear the voice of a newsvendor offstage:

NEWSVENDOR Rat invasion over! no more dead rats!

Michel cries out in pain. His son runs in..

MICHEL'S SON Doctor! You must come! It's my dad!

RIEUX Michel? He's worse?

MICHEL'S SON He's bringing up horrible pink stuff, and there are enormous black lumps on his neck and armpits.

Rieux hurries to Michel who is vomiting noisily into a bin, groaning and clutching his neck and stomach. He is gasping for breath as he speaks with great difficulty.

MICHEL It's burning! The bugger's burning me up!

MICHEL'S SON What is it, doctor?

RIEUX It could be several things. We can't be sure yet. Give him lots of water, and a laxative.

MICHEL *(Mumbling, delirious.)* Rats! I can see the little swine. They stagger about, then they die. Everywhere...

MICHEL'S SON Doctor, look at his mouth! What's that growing on it?

RIEUX Looks like some sort of fungus.

(Michel's son goes to wipe his mouth.)

RIEUX Don't touch it! We'll have to get him into an isolation ward at the hospital. *Michel's breathing gets noisier, then subsides gently.*

MICHEL'S SON Ah, that's better. He's calmer now.

Rieux examines Michel — pulse, stethoscope.)

RIEUX *(bewildered)* I'm sorry, son. He's dead.

Rieux faces the audience. Michel and his son go off.

Sc. 8

RIEUX Michel was the first one to die. His death marked the end of one phase and the beginning of a much more difficult one. Up till now we'd had disconcerting signs. From this point on, bewilderment gradually turned into acute anxiety as it dawned on people that our little town had been targeted to become a place where rats expire in the sun, and ordinary folk like Michel die suddenly and mysteriously. *(Exit.)*

Sc. 9

Enter Ordinary Bloke 1 and Ordinary Bloke 2.

O.B.1 You knew that bloke Campos, didn't you?

O.B.2 Campos? Oh, yes, tall fella with a black moustache.

O.B.1 Yeah, that's the one. Tram conductor.

- O.B.2 Yeah. *(Pause.)* So? What about him?
- O.B.1 Well, he's snuffed it.
- O.B.2 Go on! When?
- O.B.1 After all this rat business started.
- O.B.2 Jeez! What was wrong with him?
- O.B.1 I dunno. He had a temperature. He wasn't strong, you know. Abscesses under his arm. It was too much for him, poor sod.
- O.B.2 He was no worse off than anyone else.
- O.B.1 Well, he had a weak chest. And he played in the town band. Always blowing down a bugle, he was.
- O.B.2 Oh! You shouldn't blow down a bugle if you're poorly. Wears you out it does. *(Exeunt. Rieux enters, carrying a telephone— preferably an old-fashioned column type .)*

Sc. 10

RIEUX I telephoned the President of the Oran Medical Association, Dr. Picard, and asked him about these cases of infectious fever.

Rieux speaks into the telephone. PICARD appears, telephone in hand.

PICARD I just don't understand it. I've had two deaths, one in 48 hours. When I'd left the second one I thought he was on the mend, but three days later he was dead.

RIEUX Well, let me tell you I've phoned a few other doctors, and all together we've had about twenty cases like that. Nearly all fatal.

PICARD Good heavens!

RIEUX So, don't you think it would be a good idea to isolate any new cases?

PICARD Mmmm, well, I don't know about that. I can't do anything. It's up to the authorities. Anyway, who says it's infectious?

RIEUX I don't have any evidence, but the symptoms are very disturbing.

PICARD I'll have a word with the mayor. That's all I can do. *(Exit. Rieux faces the audience.)*

Sc. 11

RIEUX Day after day I was called out to lance the suppurating glands of patients in agony. A couple of incisions and out came a mixture of blood and pus, but it was no

good. They swelled up again in no time, and usually the patient died emitting a foul smell.

As long as each G.P. was aware only of his own two or three cases, nobody thought to do anything. Finally, some enterprising public servant at the municipal offices did a bit of adding up, and it became obvious we were in the midst of an epidemic. One day my old colleague Dr. Castel came to see me.

Sc. 12

Castel enters

CASTEL Of course, you do know what it is, don't you Rieux?

RIEUX I'm waiting for the test results.

CASTEL I don't need test results. I worked in China for a long time, and I saw a few cases in Paris twenty years ago. But nobody dared to name it for fear of panic. A colleague of mine said "It's impossible, Castel, everybody knows it's been eradicated in the West". Everybody but the dead, that is. Oh come on, Rieux, you know what it is as well as I do.

RIEUX It's unbelievable, Castel, but it must be the plague.

CASTEL You know what they'll say: "It disappeared from temperate countries years ago."

RIEUX What does that mean, "disappeared"?

CASTEL And don't forget twenty years ago in Paris.

RIEUX Right. Let's hope this lot won't be any more serious than that was.

Castel exits. Rieux turns to audience.

Sc. 13

RIEUX So it was that the word was uttered for the first time. Plague. There have been as many plagues in the world as wars, and yet both wars and plagues catch us unawares. I was caught out as much as other people. I simply didn't want to believe it. It still seemed... unreal. Plague? No. It didn't make sense. The word conjured up old images of pestilence: appalled Londoners watching cartloads of corpses going by. Or plague-ridden Athens, with the living fighting each other to get their dead loved ones cremated on the burning pyres rather than left rotting on the beach.

No, things weren't that bad. The day was peaceful outside. Everyday sounds. The screech of a circular saw, the rattle of a tram... These were certainties that one

had to hold on to, because they contradicted cruelty and pain. Right, the word “plague” had been spoken, but it had infected only a few victims. We just had to take the necessary steps, that’s all. Above all, one had to do one’s job well.

I had just got to the point of making this profound and world-shaking observation when I saw a man I knew well coming towards me: Joseph Grand. He’s a lowly pen-pusher at the town hall. But to his credit he’d recently had the presence of mind to cut down his neighbour Cottard. For some unknown reason Cottard had tried to hang himself, and Grand cut the rope while he was still breathing.

Sc. 14

Grand enters, wearing jacket several sizes too big for him and a hat which rests on his ears. He is waving a sheet of paper.

GRAND Ah, doctor, just look at these numbers! Eleven deaths in 48 hours! *(He hands the sheet to Rieux.)*

RIEUX *(Looks at the figures.)* These are from the council offices, are they?

GRAND Yes, the paper landed on my desk this afternoon for me to copy. By the way, Cottard wants to apologise for all the trouble he caused you.

RIEUX *(Reading the statistics, doesn’t hear Grand.)* Well, well! Maybe it’s time we called this illness by its proper name.

GRAND So Cottard is ill, is he?

RIEUX What? Cottard? No, I was talking about the disease that’s spreading. So far, we’ve been marking time. Come with me, Grand, I have to go to the laboratory.

GRAND I agree, doctor, one must call things by their proper name. But what is the name, eh?

RIEUX I can’t tell you. And anyway it wouldn’t be any use to you.

GRAND *(Smiles.)* You see? It isn’t so easy. If you’ll excuse me, I have to catch my tram. My evenings are sacred. As they say where I come from, “Never put off till tomorrow...”...

RIEUX ...what you didn’t do yesterday. I’ve heard wild horses wouldn’t get you out of your flat after dinner-time. What do you do? Catch up with your town hall work?

GRAND *(embarrassed)* No, it’s... personal work.

RIEUX And is it coming along all right?

GRAND I suppose it has to, seeing that I’ve been working on it for years. You have to keep slogging on, don’t you? Although, there isn’t much progress really.

RIEUX So, what is it exactly?

GRAND *(mumbling and waving his arms about)* Oh, it's a sort of... a kind of... personal... personality... development thing. Excuse me, I have to go. *(He raises his hat and shambles off. Rieux smiles and shakes his head sympathetically. He exits.)*

Sc. 15

The next day. A meeting of the Health Committee. Dr. Picard sits centre to chair the meeting. Dr. Castel bustles in, doctor's bag in hand.

CASTEL Good morning, Picard. Sorry I'm late.

PICARD *(looking at his watch)* Where's Rieux?

CASTEL. Parking the car. He gave me a lift. We've had a lot of house calls.

PICARD Hrrrmph. Haven't we all? ? He's the one who's pushed for this meeting. I have to report on it to the county authorities.

CASTEL You know there's no serum anywhere in the county? Rieux phoned the warehouse. We have to wait for it to come from Paris.

PICARD Oh. I'd better send a telegram.

CASTEL Rieux already has. *(PICARD is not pleased.)*

Rieux arrives.

PICARD Ah, good, now we can start. We doctors know the situation. The question is simply this: what is the appropriate course of action?

CASTEL *(calmly)* No. The question is: is it or is it not the plague?

PICARD In my opinion, we should not overreact. All we can say for certain is that it's a fever with inguinal complications. Speculation is dangerous, in science and in life.

CASTEL I know for sure it's plague. But I realise that if the authorities said that publicly, they'd have to take some very harsh measures. Not good for votes.

PICARD What do you think, Rieux?

RIEUX It's an infection with typhoid features, but with vomiting and bubonic swelling of the glands in the groin and armpit. I lanced a few bubos, and the laboratory analysis detects something very like plague bacillus. But not identical.

PICARD We mustn't jump to conclusions about this. We have to wait for the statistical results of the series of analyses now under way.

There is a brief silence.

RIEUX I simply report what I have observed. The spleen increases to four times its size in three days. The mesenteric ganglia grow in the abdomen to the size of an orange. The disease is spreading so fast half the town will be dead within two months. Consequently it doesn't matter whether you call it plague or growing pains. What does matter is preventing half the town dying.

Pause.

PICARD Well, that's an administrative decision. In order for the authorities to act, we have to state categorically that it is a plague epidemic.

CASTEL And if we don't say it's plague, half the population will die. It's not a question of vocabulary, it's a question of time.

PICARD So you're saying that even if it's not plague, the preventive health measures applicable to plague should be applied here?

RIEUX Yes.

PICARD Dr. Castel?

CASTEL I agree.

PICARD *(with a sigh)* So be it.

Exeunt.

Sc. 16

In the cathedral. Sound of heavy rain outside. Father Paneloux, wearing appropriate vestments, mounts the pulpit to deliver a sermon in a strong, impassioned voice.

PANELOUX *(vehemently)* My brethren, a terrible disaster is befalling you! Brethren.. you have deserved it! The Bible tells us that since the beginning of history, God has brought down pestilence upon his enemies. He has stricken down the proud and the blind. Think on this, and fall to your knees! *(Rain gets heavier, then subsides.)* The gates of this town have been shut. You and the plague have been locked in together, and there is no escaping harsh reality.

(With increasing fervour.) The plague is staring you in the face, and you must all search your souls. The just have nothing to fear, but sinners have good reason to tremble! For too long God has looked on the people of this town with pity and forgiveness. Not any more! God is weary of waiting for your sincere repentance, and He has turned His face away from us, as He did from all cities of sin. We are are bereft of the light of God, and for a long time to come, like the accursed sinners of Sodom and Gomorrah, we shall weep in the shadow of the plague.

The wheat shall be separated from the chaff. Even now, the angel of the plague, bright and shining like Lucifer, is knocking on your door, entering your home, sitting in your bedroom, awaiting your return. (*With rising emotion*) There is no power on earth, not even vain human science, that can protect you from this scourge whirling above the town, cutting down sinners and scattering their blood-soaked chaff in the wind, to make ready for the harvest of truth. (*He mops his brow and calms down.*)

And yet, in the midst of all this suffering and the cries of the dying, more than ever I feel the love of God and Christian hope. My brethren, this is the immense consolation I wanted to bring you. Not just words of chastisement, but a message of divine mercy and peace. For in the darkest depths of suffering we can see the light that leads to salvation. The will of God unfailingly transforms evil into good. The pestilence that slaughters you is working for your good and is showing you the path to follow. I hope against all hope that you will offer up to heaven the only truly Christian word, the word of love. God will do the rest.

Exit. —[*Quick change for Judge Othon!*]

Sc. 17

Rieux enters, faces audience.

RIEUX Next day I heard quite a few reactions from people to Paneloux's sermon. Some thought we've been condemned for an unknown crime to an unimaginable prison sentence. Others were simply carrying on regardless with their little lives and adapting to being shut in. And some had only one idea — find a way to escape from this prison. Then I met Judge Othon.

Sc. 18

Othon enters. They shake hands.

RIEUX Good evening, Judge.

OTHON Good evening, doctor. I saw you listening very attentively to Father Paneloux's homily yesterday.

RIEUX It was ... forceful, wasn't it? What did you think of it?

OTHON Me? Oh, I thought it was absolutely irrefutable.

Tarrou enters. Rieux greets him and shakes hands.

RIEUX Good evening, Tarrou. Do you know Judge Othon? Judge, this is Jean Tarrou. He's a newcomer to Oran, a bit of a philosopher.

They shake hands politely but formally.

TARROU I heard you asking the judge about that sermon. What did you think of it, doctor?

RIEUX Well, if he was saying the innocent and the guilty have been condemned and imprisoned without charge, even a judge wouldn't approve of that.

OTHON Well, one has to consider...

RIEUX I don't believe in collective punishment. Christians sometimes talk like that, but they're better than they seem. Paneloux is a scholar, he hasn't sat beside enough people in the throes of death. That's why he claims to speak in the name of truth.

OTHON *(stiffly)* You must excuse me. I must get back to the family.

Othon doffs his hat and goes off. [Quick change for Grand!]

TARROU So, Rieux, do you think the plague has a good side, because it forces people to think?

RIEUX *(shakes his head vehemently)* Not at all! Every disease in this world might make a few people greater, but you'd have to be crazy, blind, or spineless to just give in to the plague without a fight! What did you think of it?

TARROU That kind of ardour has its appeal. At the start and finish of any pestilence people resort to rhetoric. But the only truth is in silence. *(Pause)* Do you believe in God, doctor?

RIEUX I don't know what that means. I'm in the dark, trying to glimpse the merest glimmer of light.

TARROU In that case, why are you so dedicated, if you don't believe in God?

RIEUX If I believed in an all-powerful God, I'd give up healing people and leave it to Him. But I think I'm right to struggle against the way the world's been created. A world governed by suffering and death.

TARROU So... you're just doing your job?

RIEUX That's it, more or less. Little temporary triumphs leading to endless defeat. That's not a reason to give up the struggle.

TARROU You may find this ridiculous, doctor, but you are absolutely right.

RIEUX Oh, I don't know about that. Do you?

TARROU I know most things.

RIEUX You really think you know all about life!

TARROU *(calmly)* Oh yes. Excuse me, I must go.

They shake hands. Tarrou goes off. Rieux sits and meditates for a moment about what has just been said.

Sc. 19

A bar. Grand enters, a glass in either hand. Sits, gives Rieux his glass of wine.

GRAND You said white wine, doctor?

RIEUX That's very kind of you, Grand. *Santé!*

GRAND *Santé*, doctor. I'm sticking to brandy. *(He downs it in one gulp. Rieux looks surprised.)* Do you know what I've just seen?

RIEUX No, tell me.

GRAND A man standing by himself, swaying from side to side, just as the street lights came on so I could see him clearly. He wasn't trying to walk, just standing. He had his eyes shut, sweat was pouring down his face, white as a sheet. And he was laughing his head off! Didn't make a sound. Just laughing silently. Must have been a madman.

Pause. Rieux looks up at the night sky and shivers.

RIEUX Everybody will go mad in this town before long.

GRAND Fortunately I have my work.

RIEUX That's very good. Are you pleased with it?

GRAND Well, I think I'm on the right track.

RIEUX When do you think it'll be finished?

GRAND No idea. But that doesn't matter, doctor. What I'm looking forward to, you see, is the day the publisher gets the manuscript, he'll read it and then stand up *(he does so)* and say to his colleagues, "Hats off to genius, gentlemen!"

RIEUX *(astonished, doesn't know what to say)* Well... yes... that would be...

GRAND That's why it must be perfect, you see. Sometimes I sweat over one word, one conjunction, for weeks on end. *(He seizes Rieux by the lapel)* It's easy enough to choose between *and* and *but*, isn't it? But opting for *and* or *then* is more difficult. As for *then* or *afterwards*...! You see the problem?

RIEUX I'm beginning to.

GRAND *(embarrassed)* You must forgive me, I don't know what's got into me this evening.

RIEUX Don't apologise. I'm really interested in your work.

GRAND Really? *(He pauses, then makes up his mind, pulls a tattered notebook from a pocket. It is covered with tiny writing.)* This is it.

RIEUX I'd like you to read me a bit.

GRAND *(grateful)* Oh, good. Here we go, then: *(It must be clear to the audience that he turns to the last sentence written.)*

“On a beautiful morning in the month of May, an elegant lady was riding a fine chestnut mare along the flowery avenues of the Bois de Boulogne.” *(Pause. Grand looks up nervously pulls out a handkerchief and mops the sweat off his face.)* Well? What do you think of it?

RIEUX Please, go on.

GRAND That's it. There isn't any more yet.

RIEUX You mean... Oh, I see.

GRAND I've had a devil of a job with it, as you can see *(he flips over the pages)* and the rhythm is still not perfect. But you'll see what I shall do with it. Oh yes. *(wide gesture)* When all this is over.

RIEUX *(smiles sympathetically)* Yes, my friend. When all this is over.

He and Grand shake hands. Grand goes off (to return almost immediately as Actor 3). Rieux turns to audience.

Sc.20

RIEUX That evening I heard a commotion in the street outside my apartment block and went down to see what it was. Apparently a few men had been trying to elude the guards on the city gates, and became violent when they were caught. This kind of skirmish was becoming quite frequent, and sometimes the police had to use firearms.

ACTOR 2 *(enters and stands one side of Rieux)* The biggest change caused by the plague was this: normally we all welcomed the arrival of summer, but now the combination of summer heat, plague and fear was creating an atmosphere of panic and surly agitation. Coffee and sugar were in short supply. So were peppermints: people thought they might ward off infection.

ACTOR 3 *(enters and stands the other side of Rieux)* A burning wind was blowing from the desert in the south. Waves of heat flooded the whole town. The sea and the beaches were out of bounds. No one could avoid the blinding glare of the sun except by staying indoors behind closed shutters. At the same time the number of victims was growing — to nearly 700 a week.

RIEUX Little wonder that people wanted to get out. Even quite reasonable people. There was more than one kind of resistance to the threat of slavery.

Sc. 21

Tarrou enters and addresses the audience.

TARROU I was amused when Dr. Rieux introduced me to that judge fellow. “Jean Tarrou, a bit of a philosopher”, he said. Maybe it was because the only thing that interests me is inner peace. I’m also a bit of a loner. I don’t belong here — or anywhere else really. What I do mainly is observe the strange habits, quirks and foibles of my fellow humans through the wrong end of a telescope. Like the little old man who spits at cats. Extraordinary. I’m the historian of those who have no history. Why? Because it’s only by being totally and constantly aware that one can avoid wasting one’s time.

How, I wonder, how is it possible to be a saint without God? How to lead an ethical life in a plague-ridden world without the guidance of an absolute authority?

I observe that joy and simple daily pleasures have fled our town. Nobody laughs any more, except drunkards, and they laugh too much. But young people engage in frenzied, feverish, desperate saturnalias late at night. They’re so afraid of dying.. Ah, well, I’m no better than they are, even though death means nothing to men like me. It’s an event that justifies our existence.

I decided to go and see Rieux about a little plan I had. *(He goes to one side as Rieux enters.)*

Sc. 22

Rieux is sitting at home, writing reports. The doorbell rings.

RIEUX It’s open. Come in.

Tarrou enters.

RIEUX Ah, Tarrou, good to see you. Please sit down. Now, what did you want to see me about?

TARROU I know I can be perfectly frank with you.

RIEUX Yes, of course.

TARROU Within a fortnight, a month at most, you will be useless here. Events have overtaken you.

RIEUX That’s true.

TARROU The organisation of health services is a shambles. You don't have enough men or time. Right? (*Rieux nods.*) I gather the authorities are thinking of conscripting all able-bodied men as general health attendants.

RIEUX There's too much unrest. They don't dare.

TARROU Why not ask for volunteers?

RIEUX They've tried. Very little response.

TARROU Do you know why? Half-cock bureaucratic lack of imagination. So, I have a plan for cells of volunteer health squads. If you give me the go-ahead, I'll bypass the officials and work through a network of friends and acquaintances. And I'll join one of the cells myself, of course.

RIEUX That sounds great. But you're putting yourself in the front line with a one in three chance of survival.

TARROU Meaningless statistics, doctor.

RIEUX Come to the hospital in the morning and I'll give you a jab. But tell me, Tarrou, what is driving you to get involved?

TARROU I don't know. Empathy? A feeling of solidarity, perhaps. (*Exit. Rieux turns to audience.*)

Sc.23

RIEUX Tarrou got to work the very next day and formed the first health team, which was followed by many others. They did fine work, but their importance should not be exaggerated. Those who volunteered were showing good will, but after all they weren't being heroic, They had been convinced that the plague was no longer the responsibility of a few. It was a problem that everybody had to help to overcome.

So, it was natural for old Dr. Castel to put all his energy into making serums from the very microbes infecting our town, because serums from outside were slightly different. And it was natural for Grand, who had nothing of the hero about him, to organise a sort of health service secretariat. Hygiene, prevention, disinfection of attics and cellars, home visits, transport for victims and the dead — all this required recording and statistical logging, and Grand had undertaken to do it in his spare time with his typical good will, just so as to be useful in our defence against the plague. I maintain that this insignificant and self-effacing hero was the real representative of the quiet virtue that inspired the volunteer health service. And he still battled on patiently with the rhythm of his ideal sentence.

At the same time a lot of our citizens went around saying that nothing was any use and all you could do was fall on your knees and pray. And then there were those like that young journalist, Raymond Rambert. Tarrou and I met him one evening in a bar. (*He sits on a bar stool.*)

Sc.24

A bar. "St. James Infirmary" is heard in the background. [I suggest the Preservation Hall Jazz Band version (New Orleans album vol 4) – CRD.] Tarrou and Rambert enter separately and sit at the bar, Tarrou next to Rieux. Freeze. Fade out music.
Action.

RAMBERT You see my point, don't you? I've spent days at the railway station looking longingly at old timetables and posters for holidays on the Riviera. But the worst to take were pictures of Paris — the pigeons of the Palais Royal, the Gare du Nord, empty streets round the Panthéon... (*Pause. He is close to tears.*)

RIEUX They remind you of the woman you love? (*Rambert nods*) I know exactly how you feel. It's worst at four in the morning.

RAMBERT But my case is different, special. I shouldn't be here. I'm an outsider in your town.

TARROU It's a point of view, I suppose.

RAMBERT That's what all the civil servants I've seen say, then they say "Sorry, but we can't make any exceptions", or (*simulating disgust*) "It would create a precedent". They're what I call the Formalists. Then there are the Sweet Talkers: "Don't worry, old boy, it won't last". The Methodical: "Have you filled in the necessary paper work, Monsieur?". And the Self-Important, the Useless, the Overworked who just throw up their arms. Usually, though, they're Traditionalists, who direct me to yet another office. I tell you, I'm exhausted!

RIEUX So there's no hope of your joining your wife?

RAMBERT Not by legal means anyway. Well, I thought my case was being taken seriously last week. The town hall gave me an enormous questionnaire to fill in, a complete C.V. — family history, employers, income, next of kin. I found out today that the form was "just in case".

TARROU In case of what?

RAMBERT I thought it must be in case they change their mind, but when I pressed them they said, “In case you die of plague, then we shall know who to contact and where to send the hospital bill

TARROU *(heavy irony)* Very thoughtful of them!

RAMBERT So... *(hesitates, not sure if he should tell them this)* ...since I can't go legally, I've enlisted the help of Cottard.

RIEUX Oh, Cottard! *(Laughs)* The plague has given him a new zest for life. Black market, people-running, you name it.

RAMBERT I'm not proud of myself. I'm not a coward — not most of the time anyway. But I can't bear the thought that we — my wife and I — might be middle-aged by the time we see each other again.

RIEUX I know how you feel.

TARROU *(to Rieux — Rambert doesn't pay attention to them.)* I've just asked Father Paneloux to join the health squads.

RIEUX What did he say?

TARROU I told him how short of men we are, he thought for a moment, then he agreed!

RIEUX Excellent. I'm glad to know he's better than his sermon.

TARROU Everyone is like that. You just have to provide the opportunity. It's my job in life, providing opportunities. *(He smiles and winks at Rieux. Turns to Rambert.)* When do you expect to escape?

RAMBERT Quite soon.

TARROU Pity.

RAMBERT Why?

RIEUX Tarrou thinks you could have been useful to us here.

RAMBERT Oh? How?

TARROU With our health squads.

RAMBERT Oh, no thank you! They're a good idea, but I don't approve of dying for an idea. I saw enough of that, fighting in Spain.

TARROU On which side?

RAMBERT The victims. Day after day I saw heroes being killed round me. Why? — *for an idea*. I don't believe in bravery and heroism any more.

RIEUX People aren't an idea, Rambert.

RAMBERT Yes they are! A very brief one. The only thing that interests me is love. Living or dying for the one one loves, deeply and passionately.

RIEUX *(Sadly)* You're quite right, Rambert. I think what you're doing is justified. But all this isn't about heroism. It's about integrity. The only way to fight the plague is with integrity.

RAMBERT And what exactly is integrity?

RIEUX Exactly? I don't know. In my case, it means doing my job. Now you must both excuse me, I've got work to do. *(Shakes hands and exits.)*

RAMBERT The trouble is, I don't know what my job is. Maybe I'm wrong to choose love. It's easy for you two, you don't have anything to lose.

TARROU *(looks at his watch)* I have to go too. *(Take a few steps to exit, turns.)* Did you know that Rieux's wife is in a sanatorium hundreds of kilometres away from here?

RAMBERT *(looks shocked. Quietly.)* No, I didn't know that.

TARROU He's just heard her condition has deteriorated. *(Exit.)*

Rambert goes off, slowly and thoughtfully, as "St. James Infirmary" is heard again. Fade music out. Rieux enters.

Sc.25

RIEUX The next day, Rambert phoned Tarrou and volunteered his services until he could get out of town. No doubt he kidded himself he was making a free choice, but the fact is that by the middle of August the plague was dictating everything. There were no more individual destinies. We were all part of a collective story made up from the plague and the emotions shared by us all — mainly fear and rebellion. At the height of disease and heat some of our citizens became more violent, repeatedly attacking the gates, and insanely setting fire to their houses in the belief that this would kill off the plague.

Swimming in the sea. That's the thing I missed most. The beaches were outside the quarantine area, and so was the sea. I'm going to make a confession. One night I broke quarantine, yes, broke the rule that had been imposed on everyone. With my friend Tarrou .

Tarrou enters. Night scene. They walk towards the sea.

The moon had risen and gave the sky a milky white sheen.

TARROU It's good to get away from the sickly stink of the town.

RIEUX I can smell iodine and seaweed. We must be close. Shh! *(They stand still, listening. Sound of waves breaking gently on shore. Tarrou lies down and looks up at the sky.)*

RIEUX *(continues)* There it is! The sea! I'll never forget this moment, Tarrou. Its velvety thickness, supple and smooth, like the shiny coat of a beautiful animal, rising and falling as if it's breathing.

(He sits beside Tarrou.)

The night stretched out endlessly before us. I looked at Tarrou and saw he was feeling the same strange elation. Without a word, we undressed and plunged into the warm sea. I floated on my back and gazed up at the vault of the sky, full of moon and stars.

TARROU We swam together, side by side, then again without speaking we regained the beach and dressed. *(They stand.)*

RIEUX We both felt as though the plague had forgotten us for a brief moment of pure happiness, but as we came back to the town, we knew we were about to be its prisoners again.

Exeunt. Slow fade to black.

INTERVAL

Sc. 25 continued.

Rieux enters.

RIEUX For months not one drop of rain fell to freshen up the town, which became coated with a layer of grey dust. Then that accursed wind started up, sweeping and moaning through the hot deserted streets, stripping the grey dust off the walls. Deaths were now occurring more frequently in the central business district, and its affluent residents accused the wind of blowing in infectious germs from the working-class suburbs. Buildings were set on fire and looted, sometimes by hitherto honest citizens, and this forced the authorities to declare a state of seige and apply harsher penalties. But only two thieves were executed by firing squad, a drop in the ocean.

The imposition of a curfew was more effective. After eleven o'clock at night, under the moonlit sky, the white walls lining the treeless grid of streets, the silence was unbroken by steps of human or howl of dog.

There was one sound quite often heard during the night, however. Ambulances taking bodies to the lime pits at full speed. Funerals had become peremptory affairs, and often quarantined families were not allowed to pay their last respects. Later on, as the daily toll of dead grew, burial space became scarce, so plague victims had to be cremated. We had to use trams with the seats removed to transport the bodies to the ovens. By morning a thick, foul-smelling vapour hovered over the eastern suburbs.

Exile affected every one of us. The deepest and most widespread suffering was separation. But even this suffering lost its pathos. We were wasting away, spiritually, morally, and physically. Except Cottard the black marketeer. He thrived on the plague. No one knew him or understood him better than Jean Tarrou. *(Exit.)*

Sc. 26

Tarrou and Cottard enter from opposite sides. Cottard is reading a newspaper and doesn't see him.

TARROU Good day, Monsieur Cottard.

COTTARD Oh, it's you, Monsieur Tarrou. I was just reading the latest figures. Have you seen them?

TARROU I know they are serious, but what does that prove? It proves we need to take more exceptional precautions.

COTTARD You've already taken them.

TARROU Yes, but each one of us has to take them, as an individual responsibility.

COTTARD What d'you mean?

TARROU There are too many men shirking their duty. We're short of health squad volunteers. They're open to all, you know. Why don't you join us?

COTTARD Because they won't do any good, the plague's too strong. And it's not my job. Anyway, the plague suits me so I don't see why I should help to end it.

TARROU Ah, of course! I was forgetting, but for the plague you'd be arrested.

COTTARD *(jumps with surprise and anger, and sits)* Who told you that?

TARROU Rieux and I put two and two together. Don't worry, we shan't give you away, we're not interested in your past history. We're not fond of the police either.

COTTARD *(wipes his brow)* It's an old case they've opened up again. I thought they'd forgotten all about it, but someone couldn't keep his big trap shut.

TARROU Is it serious?

COTTARD It's not murder. But I'd get sent down. It's all a mistake anyway. Everybody makes mistakes. I can't bear the thought of being separated from my home, my habits, my friends...

TARROU Surely, the only way not to be separated from others is to have a clear conscience.

COTTARD *(with a wicked look)* Well, at that rate, everybody's separated.

TARROU So that's why you tried to commit suicide, just before the plague — fear of being shut *out* rather than being shut *in*?

COTTARD It was a stupid idea.

TARROU I can see why you won't be joining a health squad.

COTTARD You mustn't hold it against me.

TARROU Of course not. But don't do anything to spread the microbes.

COTTARD As if I would! I didn't want the plague and it's not down to me if it's got me out of a hole. And if it's not getting any better, at least everyone's in the same boat. Take it from me, the only way to bring people together is to send them the plague. Just look around you.

TARROU Aren't you afraid of catching plague yourself?

COTTARD No, I don't take it seriously. You see, I've worked out that you can't accumulate illnesses. Suppose you have incurable cancer or T.B., you won't catch plague or typhus, it's impossible! Anyway, plague isn't as bad as all that. People don't know when they're well off. You can hear them saying, "After the plague I'll do this or that". I couldn't say "After I've been arrested, I'll do this or that". You want my opinion? They're miserable because they don't let themselves go. I know what I'm talking about.

TARROU I agree, you do, Cottard. You see through the conflict most of us live with: we have a deep need for the human warmth that brings us together, but we can't surrender ourselves to it because of the distrust that makes us keep our distance. But a word of advice: I don't think you should ever want others to suffer because you have.

COTTARD Point taken. You know, Tarrou, I can talk to you. You're the first man who's ever tried to understand me.

TARROU Well, I think you deserve understanding. Not that it's easy in your case!

They exit, laughing.

Sc. 27

Rieux enters.

RIEUX From the beginning of September Rambert was made temporary manager of one of the quarantine houses, and still hoped to escape. Grand went on with his civil service work during the day, and in the evening kept his meticulous tally, and polished his sentence. His health had never been good, and he was continually exhausted. As indeed we all were, but Rambert, myself and especially Tarrou, were more robust.

Rambert worked alongside me solidly and uncomplainingly. One day I had to give him a warning.

Sc.28

Rambert enters.

RIEUX Rambert, Judge Othon mentioned you to me this morning.

RAMBERT Oh?

RIEUX He said, "Advise him not to frequent smugglers, because he's being watched".

RAMBERT What's that mean?

RIEUX It means you must hurry.

RAMBERT Thank you. *(He shakes Rieux's hand.)* Tell me, why don't you stop me leaving?

RIEUX Because it's your business. You've chosen happiness and I've nothing against that.

RAMBERT Even so, why tip me off and tell me to get out quickly?

RIEUX *(Smiling.)* Because I want to do my bit for happiness. How soon can you go?

RAMBERT *(Not overjoyed.)* I was about to tell you. Midnight tonight.

RIEUX Ah. I guessed something was afoot. Paneloux will replace you in the quarantine house. He's already done a lot. I'll have to reorganise the third investigation team to manage without you.

RAMBERT Doctor, there's something I want to...

Tarrou rushes in.

RIEUX Yes, Tarrou, what's wrong?

TARROU Good news. Castel has produced his first serums. He suggests a trial vaccination. Hello, Rambert.

RIEUX That *is* good news. I expect you know about Rambert? He's going (to)...

RAMBERT I'm not going. I'm staying. I used to think I was an outsider in this town, but working with you... I belong here, whether I like it or not. With these people.

No visible reaction from the others.

RIEUX *(In a flat expressionless voice.)* What about your wife?

RAMBERT I've re-thought the whole thing. I continue to believe what I did believe, but if I left I'd be ashamed.

RIEUX That's ridiculous! There's no shame in preferring happiness.

RAMBERT You can't have happiness based on shame. Love can't thrive on a bad conscience.

TARROU If you choose now to share others' unhappiness, you might not have the chance of happiness ever again.

RAMBERT *(irritated.)* So what are you doing in your hospital? Have you said No to happiness? *(No response.)* Well? Have you?

RIEUX *(Wearily.)* I just don't know. Nothing is more precious than what you love, yet I'm turning away from it. Make what you will of that, and let's get on with our job.

TARROU Welcome back on board, Rambert.

Tarrou and Rambert go off.

Sc.29

RIEUX Within a few hours we had someone to try Castel's serum out on. It was Philippe, Judge Othon's little boy. The parents had to be sent off to quarantine, of course, and isolated from each other. That was the rule, and they didn't argue, devastating though this double separation was.

After twenty hours, I decided the boy's case was desperate. His frail body was being devoured by infection. So Castel and I gave him the long injection, without a single reaction from the child. Next morning, he was convulsing, his teeth clenched, his eyes tight shut. I'd been there with him since 4 a.m., and Father Paneloux came at dawn, he on one side of the hospital bed and I on the other.

(Paneloux enters quietly and sinks to his knees to pray at an invisible bedside.)

PANELOUX Lord, save this child. *(He stays there, praying silently.)*

RIEUX *(continues)* We had seen children die before, of course, but had never followed the painful death throes of an innocent child minute by minute as we were now.

Suddenly the boy doubled up with a screeching groan, as if he'd been bitten in the stomach, and stayed like that, shaking uncontrollably, tears pouring down his pallid cheeks. The battle for life went on much longer than normal, but gradually the boy's cries and screams grew fainter, and his hands ceased to claw at the sheet. We had merely prolonged his excruciating pain.

Sc.30

Paneloux stands. Rieux confronts him. Paneloux moves as if to put a consoling arm round Rieux's shoulder, but Rieux rejects him.

PANELOUX Come now, doctor, you did your best.

RIEUX *(with barely controlled anger.)* That child was innocent, and well you know it! *(He sinks on to a chair, and buries his head in his hands. Paneloux is visibly moved too, but masters it. Pause.)*

PANELOUX Why did you speak to me with such anger?

RIEUX I'm surprised you have to ask.

PANELOUX What we have just witnessed was unbearable for me as well.

RIEUX Well, you know who to blame, don't you? There are outrageous things going on in this town that drive me to total revulsion.

PANELOUX I understand. Outrageous because they are beyond our comprehension.

RIEUX No, outrageous because they are outrageous. Unjust. Revolting. *(He struggles for words, tears of anger in his eyes)* Simply... not... acceptable.

PANELOUX But perhaps we have to love what we cannot comprehend. The love of God surpasses all understanding, and we too must...

RIEUX *(stands aggressively.)* Love? Now you've gone too far! Don't you dare talk to me about the love of God! Love a father who beats his children to death and says "I'm only doing this because I love you!"? No, I have a different idea of love, and until I die I shall refuse to love this God of yours who tortures children!

PANELOUX *(Profoundly distressed)* Ah, doctor, I have just understood the grace of God.

RIEUX Grace! Huh! I don't have it, I know. What's more, I wouldn't want it. Not from your God. *(Pause)* Let's end this discussion. We have to work together.

PANELOUX *(moved)* Yes, yes, you are also working for the salvation of mankind.

RIEUX Salvation! Now don't start me off again. Saved from what, Father? An agonising death? What did that child do that was so terrible? Apart from being born a miserable sinner? Salvation! That word's too big for me. I only understand microbes. *(Deep breath.)* Ah well, health comes first. *(Starts to go)* Oh... and I shan't be repeating that outburst of mine. Fatigue is a kind of madness. So, forgive me.

PANELOUX *(extends his hand, which Rieux takes and holds.)* Of course. Yet I still haven't convinced you, have I!

RIEUX *(slight smile)* Nor I, you. What's it matter? Like it or not, we're in this together, and not even God can put us asunder!

They go off in opposite directions.

Sc. 31

Tarrou enters.

TARROU Even as "a bit of a philosopher", I was deeply affected by the death of Philippe Othon. He was a sweet child. Took after his mother. I saw his father shortly afterwards, in his quarantine camp. He was still dressed in his stiff collar and formal suit. He said he hoped Philippe hadn't suffered too much, and I lied and said Dr. Rieux had told me his boy didn't really suffer. I felt that something should be done for Othon, but how can one help a judge?

He asked if I was going to hear Paneloux's second sermon, and I said probably not — not after the last one. Othon said the subject would be "Can a priest consult a doctor?" There does seem to be a bit of a contradiction there. Rieux can tell me what he said. The trouble with Paneloux from my point of view is that he seems more concerned about personal salvation than saintliness. Still, he's doing wonderful rescue work in the hospitals, right up there in the front line. *(Exit.)*

Sc. 32

In the cathedral. Paneloux is visibly stressed and exhausted as he mounts the pulpit.

His voice is softer. But his delivery gets stronger as he goes.

PANELOUX It is possible that when I preached from this same place about the plague, I spoke to you without charity. Nevertheless, what I said then remains true, and maybe you did not listen carefully.

The plague has been among us for many long months, and we know it all the better from having seen it at our table or beside the bed of our loved ones, or walking

with us to work. So now we are better placed to listen to what it is telling us and learn from it. The Christian benefits from the cruellest trial. What the Christian must do is learn how to find that benefit. It is not for us to try to explain the plague but to learn from it.

There are necessary evils and unnecessary evils. Take for example Don Juan being cast down into Hell, and the death of a child. It is right that the libertine should be blasted to Hell, but we cannot comprehend the suffering of a child. Truly there is nothing on earth more important than the horror of a child's suffering, and the reasons we have to find for it. God puts our backs to the wall when we try to understand this. It would be easy for me to say that the eternal joy awaiting the child makes up for his suffering, but I cannot be certain about that. I have my back to the wall, loyal to the Cross which is a symbol of torture. And I can say without fear to you today: My brethren, we have to believe everything or deny everything. And who among you would dare to deny everything?

Religion in the time of plague cannot be traditional, indulgent everyday religion. Today, God is doing us a favour by putting us in such misery that we are forced to choose All or Nothing. The Christian must learn to give in to divine will. I can hear some of you muttering the word "Fatalism". I would not reject it, but only if you add the word "active". Active fatalism. We should take the sensible precautions introduced by society in a chaotic time of pestilence.

Finally, — this is not easy for me to say — we have to want the suffering of a child because God wants it. Only God can make the suffering and death of children necessary, because it is impossible to comprehend it.

All we can do is start to move forward in the dark, feeling our way and trying to do good. There is no middle way. We must stand fast, accept the outrageous, because we must either hate God or love Him. And who would choose to hate Him?

That is the hard lesson I wanted to share with you.

Paneloux walks out slowly and wearily.

Sc. 33

Rieux enters, faces audience.

RIEUX Paneloux did not in fact speak on the question of whether a priest should consult a doctor, but he gave his answer unequivocally in the next few weeks. His landlady found him stretched out on his bed, motionless. He had a fever, but when she

suggested calling in the doctor he said it was against his principles. His cough got worse, and when she again mentioned a doctor, he sat up and in a strangely indifferent voice said it would be enough to get him into hospital. The landlady was appalled, and telephoned me.

I was surprised to find he had none of the main symptoms of bubonic or pulmonary plague. Nevertheless, his condition was alarming, with a very weak pulse.

I told him I had to isolate him, but would stay with him, and he gave an odd smile and said with difficulty, "Thank you, but priests have no friends. They have placed everything in God's hands."

He asked for his crucifix and turned to look at it. In hospital, Paneloux didn't open his mouth. Underwent all the treatments without protest, but never let go of the crucifix. The fever and cough grew worse until he coughed up something like red cotton wool. The next day, they found him dead, half fallen out of bed. They wrote on his card: "Doubtful case".

Sc. 34

Tarrou enters.

TARROU I went to the opera last night with Cottard.

RIEUX I didn't know you were an opera-lover, Tarrou.

TARROU There's a lot you don't know about me.

RIEUX What did you see?

TARROU *Orpheus and Eurydice*. The opera company has been trapped here since the plague started, so they repeat the performance every Friday night. It was extraordinary to see the elegant audience making polite conversation and the musicians tuning up, as if evening dress could chase away the plague. Act One went all right, with Orpheus moaning and complaining and a few women in tunics told us he was unhappy. In Act 2 I noticed his voice was a bit wobbly and his gestures more than usually jerky.

Then in Act 3, you know the great duet when he loses Eurydice for ever, Orpheus suddenly staggered down to the footlights in his pseudo-classical costume. It was quite grotesque. He collapsed, the orchestra ground to a halt, and the people in the stalls stood up and made for the exit, at first in dead silence as if they were going out of a funeral service. Gradually panic set in, and by the end they were pushing and shoving and yelling to get out as fast as they could, leaving hats and fans behind. Cottard and I were left alone, looking at an image of what our own lives had become.

A performance of the plague, in ancient Athens and in 18th-century Paris and here in our own time.

Rieux nods his head as if contemplating Tarrou's story. Pause.

RIEUX Tarrou, what did you mean, there's a lot I don't know about you?

TARROU Just that you've never tried to find out what makes me tick.

RIEUX There hasn't been much time!

TARROU True. Do you regard me as a friend?

RIEUX Of course. I value your friendship greatly.

TARROU That's reassuring.

RIEUX One thing about you that puzzles me, Jean, is why you have such a down on judges. You call Othon "Enemy Number One"!

TARROU Ah! Now that's not a bad place to start. My father was a prosecuting attorney, with a very tidy mind — he knew the national railway timetable off by heart. I was quite fond of him until one day, when I was seventeen, he invited me to go and see him at work. Up till then I'd had only an abstract idea of what went on in a law court. I couldn't take my eyes off the accused man, a little guy with thin red hair, chewing his nails. I heard my father proclaim, "This head must fall", and I realised he was demanding his head be cut off. But he didn't do it himself, he just went and watched.

RIEUX I think that's the custom for a state prosecutor.

TARROU Yes, it is. To be present at "the last moments" of what should be called the most contemptible kind of murder. So I ran away from home and became a rolling stone, joining up with revolutionary dissidents all over Europe.

RIEUX You were on the right side.

TARROU Ah, but it's not as simple as that, Bernard. *We* had people killed as well. I was convinced that these few deaths were necessary to bring about a world where there wouldn't be any more killing. Then one day I saw a man shot, in Hungary. The firing squad stood only a couple of paces away from the condemned man. They made a hole in his chest you could stick your fist through. I haven't slept well since that day.

RIEUX Why not?

TARROU I lost my peace of mind. I realised that I had the plague within me, and had had it all those years when I thought I was fighting the plague. Indirectly I had contributed to the deaths of thousands of men...

RIEUX Very indirectly...

TARROU ... by approving actions and principles that led to their death. I said to myself, if you give in once there's no reason to stop. History proves my point.

Nowadays it a question of who can do the most killing. The whole world is stricken by a killing madness. That's why I know, Rieux, that each one of us, without exception, has this plague inside us.

RIEUX Even you?

TARROU Oh yes. But I don't consent to it, I try to resist it and to avoid infecting anyone else, and that is even more tiring than the infection itself. I reject everything that makes people die. That's why I joined up with you, the healer. It's one way to get a little peace, right in there with the victims. In short, what interests me is how to be a saint.

RIEUX But you don't believe in God!

TARROU Exactly. Can one be a saint without God? That's the only real problem in the world today.

RIEUX Personally, I'm not keen on heroes or saints. I just try to be human.

TARROU I'm less ambitious than you!

RIEUX You know what we should do, in the name of friendship?

TARROU What?

RIEUX Go for a swim in the sea. Immersion is a reputable pleasure — worthy of a future saint.

They go off laughing.

Sc. 35

RIEUX At the end of November the heat gave way to cold and torrential rain. Christmas was miserable, with nothing in the unlit shops. A few children ran and played in the drab freezing streets. The churches echoed with complaint rather than thanksgiving.

The authorities had thought the cold weather would bring some relief from the plague, but it came and went and came back, carrying victims off without discrimination. Judge Othon died, having returned to work in an isolation camp where he said he felt closer to his son.

In January, an icy blue sky seemed to purify the air. The lines of corpses got smaller and smaller until, on the 25th it was announced that the plague had retreated. We survivors could breathe again, we had not been picked off. Jean Tarrou told me he

was feeling very tired, and I said we all were. “But I still have a lot to do,” he said, “and I have to be ready.” Then he said something strange: “There is always a moment every day or night when one is a coward, but I’m not afraid of anything now.”

A few days before the town gates were opened, when everyone was expecting to be liberated, Tarrou developed a fever and a raging thirst. I convinced myself it was nothing serious, just another virus. My old mother and I looked after him in our own house. He was vaccinated, and he fought for days, but eventually lost the game. He had seemed to reach that difficult peace he could never define, but only in death. Pity we never had the chance to enjoy our new-found friendship.

The next day, I received the telegram telling me my wife had died the previous week.

Exit.

Sc. 36

Same sounds of crowd rejoicing and cheering as at the start, fireworks, etc. Rieux re-enters carrying his doctor’s bag.

RIEUX You hear them? That’s the inhabitants of Oran you can hear. It’s a celebration, not a revolution! A celebration because it’s all over at last. Finished. For the time being. But not everybody is happy about it. Cottard went berserk and fired his pistol at random into the happy crowd. He didn’t kill anyone — except a stray fleabitten spaniel — before being led away screaming by the police he had feared so much.

Old Dr. Castel has survived, and so has Grand, very pleased at having cut out all the adjectives from his masterpiece of a sentence. Rambert’s wife quickly arrived by ship, and he held her in his arms with tears of happiness — or repressed sorrow, he wasn’t sure which.

If there is any meaning behind all that suffering and exile, and this desire for love and togetherness, it escapes me. But I have learned there is more to admire in our fellow men than there is to despise.

Now you must excuse me — I have a case of mumps to see to.

Exit.

THE END

TRANSLATION & ADAPTATION COPYRIGHT © COLIN DUCKWORTH 2006