

SUNFLOWERS

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Synopsis

Sunflowers is a play about the nine weeks Vincent van Gogh and Paul Gauguin spent together in the south of France, culminating in the moment van Gogh cuts off his own ear. Their friendship and rivalry is chronicled through scenes of painting, discussing art, and Arlesian life, as well as their letters to Theo van Gogh.

As Gauguin is beginning his ascent to recognition in the Parisian art circle, he is paralleled by Vincent beginning his descent into madness. This descent is brought on by the voices of four victims of Jack the Ripper, who speak to each other and comment on the action of the play, slipping unconsciously into moments where they speak uncontrollably to Vincent.

These four women serve as the voices in Vincent's head, the townspeople of Arles, and the spirit of the Yellow House in which the artists stay. The voices of these four women bring the audience into the world which Gauguin and van Gogh inhabited, and give us insight into the common ground between the violence and vulnerability in creating art.

Lights up on an empty stage. Four sections of walls of the Yellow House in Arles appear in the space. Upstage right, a gap between the two upstage walls leads to the kitchen. The stage right wall has one window. A gap between the stage left walls is a door leading outside. The four voices, Catherine, Liz, Mary, and Annie, appear from behind the walls. They carry canvases, Daumier prints, a table, and one or two chairs to set up the stage. Vincent enters with a newspaper. As he reads, we hear Mary's voice.

MARY

Dear Boss,

I keep on hearing the police have caught me but they won't fix me just yet. I have laughed when they look so clever and talk about being on the right track. I am down on whores and I shan't quit ripping them till I do get buckled. Grand work the last job was. I gave the lady no time to squeal. How can they catch me now. I love my work and want to start again. You will soon hear of me with my funny little games. I saved some of the proper red stuff in a ginger beer bottle over the last job to write with but it went thick like glue and I can't use it. Red ink is fit enough I hope ha ha. The next job I do I shall clip the lady's ear off and send to the police officers just for jolly, wouldn't you? Keep this letter back till I do a bit more work, then give it out straight. My knife's so nice and sharp I want to get to work right away if I get a chance. Good Luck. Yours truly,

Jack the Ripper.

Vincent puts the paper down and, disgusted, leaves the room. The girls watch him go.

CATHERINE

There are two men inside every artist.

LIZ

Ew.

MARY

Not like that, Liz.

ANNIE

The poet and the craftsman.

CATHERINE

One is born a poet.

MARY

One becomes the craftsman.

ANNIE

I would rather die of passion than of boredom.

LIZ

Who wouldn't?

MARY (*"seriously?"*)

Stop?

LIZ

Sin ought to be something exquisite, my dear.

ANNIE

Good one.

LIZ

Thanks.

MARY

Inability, human incapacity, is the only boundary to art.

ANNIE

Blow the candle out.

CATHERINE

I don't need to see what my thoughts look like.

LIZ

Everything is only a dream.

MARY

Sometimes you have a sorrow that is so great it leaves no room for any other.

ANNIE

The conclusion does not belong to the artist.

Beat. They look around the room.

CATHERINE

Look at this. Poor Vincent.

LIZ

Literally.

CATHERINE

What?

LIZ (gesturing around the room)

Literally, poor. He doesn't have anything.

They laugh.

CATHERINE

I think that's kind of the point.

LIZ

How can he have so little and still be so messy?

ANNIE

Have you ever met an artist before?

MARY

Where do you think he went?

CATHERINE

He'll be back.

MARY

How do you know?

LIZ

He always does, doesn't he?

MARY

Not always.

ANNIE

Shut up Mary, you think you know everything.

MARY

You shut up, I hear him at the door.

LIZ (*jumping on Mary*)

Uh oh, be quiet!

MARY

Get off of me!

They disappear in the middle of the room, making themselves invisible without hiding outright. Vincent enters the house with a chair in each hand; these are the two he paints later that belong to himself and Gauguin. He is dressed in simple country clothes, and wears a straw hat. It is clear he can't see the girls.

LIZ (*mock spooky*)

Vincent.

CATHERINE

Stop it.

MARY

He'll hear you.

LIZ (*laughing*)

That's the point.

Vincent takes off his hat after setting the chairs down, then gets a sheet of paper from the studio table, and begins to write. He does not write throughout this speech, however; the convention of the letter is accepted and he moves to address the audience as Theo.

VINCENT

October 23, 1888.

LIZ

It's October 23 already?

MARY

Shh, don't talk over him.

VINCENT

Dear Theo,

Thank you for sending the 300 francs. The furnishing of the house is going well. Just today I have bought two chairs to place in the studio. They are a rough, rustic type—perfect for the sensibility of an artist's work.

ANNIE (*snorts*)

"The sensibility of an artist's work."

VINCENT

I also have bought a few things for making a little coffee and soup here at the house—it is becoming too expensive to continue eating at the restaurants in town. I have done a still life of the new purchases: a blue enameled iron coffee pot, a royal blue cup and saucer, a milk jug with cobalt and white checks, a blue jug decorated with green, brown, and pink flowers and leaves. What a mistake Parisians make in not having a palate for crude things! It is the duty of the artist, then to bring the beauty of the ordinary to those who cannot see it, no? And besides that, I can only begin to tell you how extraordinarily happy painting makes me feel.

But, to the point: Gauguin is due to arrive today!

Catherine, Mary, and Annie gasp.

LIZ

Who?

MARY

You know, the artist? Paul Gauguin?

ANNIE

You don't know him? He's dreamy.

LIZ

Is that even an adjective people use?

ANNIE

About Gauguin, yes.

MARY

He does those paintings up north in Brittany. Vincent's been obsessing over them. Just listen to him.

VINCENT

You and I both know too well how anxiously I have been awaiting this moment. I have begun to get the house in order, and with the new furnishings it is well on its way to becoming a haven for art. All that is left is to hang a number of my humble works in Gauguin's room, and for that honor I have saved only the best. Our correspondence has been a wonderful resource to me, and I impatiently await his presence in person. Perhaps once everything is settled here, you could come from Paris to visit? Until then, a handshake.

Ever yours,

Vincent.

Vincent moves around, and hangs paintings around the room with great care: sunflowers, a couple landscapes of Arles, etc. Then, a knock at the door. Vincent rushes to answer it, and opens it to Gauguin. The girls expand the house's walls in a rush, and circle around him. Gauguin is dark and energetic, sporting a red beret and the clothes of a Breton sailor, carrying a suitcase, an easel, and two fencing epees. Vincent is thrilled.

VINCENT

Gauguin!

Vincent goes and shakes Gauguin's hand.

ANNIE

He's cute.

MARY

Shorter than I expected.

LIZ

As if *you'd* tower over him.

CATHERINE

Look at how excited Vincent is.

VINCENT

You've made it! How was the trip? Not too long, I hope? Here, let me help you.

He takes Gauguin's bag.

GAUGUIN

Longer than I would have liked.

VINCENT

Let me show you to your room.

Gauguin goes into the studio and sets down his easel. The girls move one of the upstage walls to create the space of Gauguin's bedroom, downstage right.

I gave you the bigger room.

GAUGUIN *(from the studio)*

This is the studio, then?

VINCENT *(from Gauguin's room)*

Yes.

GAUGUIN

The colony for artists?

VINCENT

Yes.

GAUGUIN *(quiet)*

In fucking Arles.

ANNIE

He's so *tormented*.

CATHERINE

He's a prick.

LIZ

You're a prick.

CATHERINE

Good one.

VINCENT

Come see your room.

Gauguin goes to where Vincent is, and Vincent gestures around.

GAUGUIN

Thank you.

Gauguin goes into his room and sets his epees against the wall.

VINCENT

You brought swords.

GAUGUIN

They're fencing epees.

Annie pretends to swoon and Liz giggles. Catherine hits her.

VINCENT

Do you intend to use them?

GAUGUIN

It's a sport. It's like painting.

VINCENT

Are they sharp?

GAUGUIN

Only the tips.

VINCENT

I see.

Gauguin goes to the window.

GAUGUIN

What a view.

VINCENT

I thought so. Wait until you see it in the sun.

GAUGUIN

I'm sure.

He examines the paintings.

I see you've been busy.

VINCENT

I have.

GAUGUIN

These are lovely. They illuminate the entire room.

VINCENT

Thank you.

GAUGUIN

And these sunflowers. That picture - it's - it's the flower exactly. It's captured the essence.

VINCENT

Thank you.

GAUGUIN (*beginning to leave the room*)

Well, I'll have more time to admire later. I have to tell you what happened to me today.

VINCENT

What?

GAUGUIN

I had just gotten off the train and was heading here when I decided to stop at the all-night café down the street—you know it?

VINCENT

Yes.

GAUGUIN

I was in need of a drink and a clear head—the rattling of the train still echoing in my skull. I order, and I'm sitting there waiting for a number of minutes when I realize the owner's giving me this funny look. Every time I look over at him his eyes are squinted at me, almost shut, and his mouth is hanging open like an ape. Finally he brings the drink over, slaps me on the shoulder, and says 'I recognize you!' 'You do?' I said. 'Yeah,' he said, 'You're the friend!' I had to press him a bit further until he mentioned you had shown him the self-portrait I sent you.

VINCENT

Les Miserables!

GAUGUIN

Good, no?

VINCENT

I like it, and it's surely a masterpiece.

A beat.

GAUGUIN

But?

VINCENT

I find it a bit dark.

GAUGUIN

Dark? It is the pure essence of the passion and innocence of a painter! Valjean is the outcast of an unjust society, misunderstood, just as we are as artists. But both Valjean and the artist have a noble spirit.

VINCENT

Of course. Like I said, a masterpiece.

GAUGUIN

Thank you.

Pause.

VINCENT

You received mine, yes?

GAUGUIN

I did—Vincent as the Buddhist monk.

VINCENT

Inspired by Loti's *Madame Chrysanthème*, yes. A calm, spiritual life, dedicated to one sole purpose.

GAUGUIN

Art?

VINCENT

Yes, what else?

GAUGUIN

Women.

ANNIE (wanting to jump on him)

Hold me back.

LIZ (dry)

Me too, I'm going to kill him.

VINCENT

No, only art.

Gauguin laughs.

Have you read Loti?

GAUGUIN

Have I! *The Icelandic Fisherman*, my friend. *My Brother Yves!*

LIZ

What a nerd.

MARY

Hey, I like Loti. "It is true that sometimes an enveloping darkness aids one to a clearer vision."

GAUGUIN

An escape out of this European life, into a mysterious paradise!

VINCENT

Like Arles?

GAUGUIN

No, Brittany. There, the heart of man, savage and primitive. When my boots clang on that granite earth, I hear the dull, flat, powerful tone that I try to achieve in painting.

VINCENT

And so the sailor's costume.

GAUGUIN

Primitive.

VINCENT

Wild.

GAUGUIN

Savage.

VINCENT

Man's natural state, no?

GAUGUIN

Possibly.

VINCENT

I'm sure you've heard of the Ripper murders in London. Savagery.

The girls stop doing anything and look over, attentive.

GAUGUIN

Absolutely.

VINCENT

Man's natural state.

CATHERINE *(suddenly the voice in Vincent's head)*

Murderer.

GAUGUIN

Now, a murderer is not the idea I'm aiming for.

CATHERINE

Murderer.

ANNIE

Stop.

VINCENT

But it's the idea you're coming from.

CATHERINE

Murderer.

LIZ

Hey, what are you doing?

GAUGUIN

No, you've completely turned it around.

CATHERINE

Murderer.

VINCENT

Listen, I'm only saying that if you are aiming for a return to a primitive state, whatever that might mean to you, aren't you putting yourself into the same animal instincts as those of a murderer?

CATHERINE

Murderer!

MARY

I don't know if she can stop.

GAUGUIN

Vincent—

CATHERINE

MURDERER!

VINCENT (*heated*)

Don't you agree?

LIZ/MARY/ANNIE

STOP!

Catherine rushes out, and one by one the other girls follow.

GAUGUIN

I'm too tired to discuss this right now. I think I'll get ready for bed.

VINCENT (*suddenly calm*)

I can make some coffee for us.

(Beat.)

GAUGUIN

Goodnight, Vincent.

VINCENT

Goodnight.

Vincent leaves the room. Gauguin arranges for a bit, then stops to look out the window for a few moments.

Blackout

Lights up on Gauguin at the table, writing a letter. He also begins to address the audience once the convention is established.

GAUGUIN

October 29, 1888

Dear Monsieur Theo van Gogh,

I hope things are all going as well with you as they are here in Arles. I am starting to settle into a nice routine here in the house after six days. I expect that my collaboration with your brother will yield a great number of paintings, hopefully with a craft and artistry improved enough to sell in your dealership. Speaking of which, please let me know when and if you sell any of my earlier pieces. I am pleased with my work on the *Vision of the Sermon*, as well as the *Breton Girls in a Ring*. The roughness of execution in these is intentional, an experiment in strategy. I believe it has succeeded, and hopefully the collectors in Paris come around to it. The recognition would be welcome, as would the money.

Vincent has been working at a breakneck pace, and is insisting we work side by side, painting the same subject. I shall indulge him, but I do not intend to create any serious work for at least two or three more weeks. Until then, just studies.

Tell me if I am mistaken, but does Vincent subsist entirely on your allowances? He seems rather careless with his expenditures, and if the monies are solely yours, I can keep a closer eye on him if you'd like. I have already established a system for daily expenses since I've arrived. We have a little box with an allowance for each day: so much for rent, so much for tobacco, so much for food, so much for "hygienic excursions" to the brothels at night. On top of it we place a paper and pencil to write down what each of us has taken, and thereby keep a record of our expenses. It's a welcome bit of order in the house.

Thank you for everything, and I shall write you again shortly.

Cordially,

Paul Gauguin.

He stands and moves to sit next to Vincent, both working on a canvas. They are painting les Alyscamps, a cemetery in Arles. Vincent is in paint-splattered work clothes and a straw hat, Gauguin in his Breton sailor outfit. Vincent paints quickly and with his whole body, Gauguin is more reserved and methodical. Liz, Mary, and Annie stand in the distance.

LIZ

How long do we have to stand here?

MARY

As long as they paint.

ANNIE

I like it. We're being *models*.

LIZ

Shut up, this is lame. Nothing's happening.

ANNIE

Something's happening on the canvas.

LIZ

Sounds like something's happening in your pants.

MARY

Will you two stop it.

LIZ

So what was up with Catherine yesterday?

MARY

I don't know.

ANNIE

That was weird. She just went off on him.

LIZ

Yeah, but that's not like her.

MARY

It seems like something just went off when Gauguin arrived.

ANNIE

Don't blame her behavior on him.

MARY

I'm not blaming anybody. It's just what I noticed.

LIZ

It looks like Vincent's just finished.

ANNIE

He's fast.

Pause. Liz lets out a giggle. Annie rolls her eyes.

I know, I know.

VINCENT

I'm glad you agreed to paint side by side with me so early in our time together.

GAUGUIN

Of course.

VINCENT

This is the beginning! Two pieces done at the same time that complement each other, improve each other.

GAUGUIN

The artist's society.

VINCENT

How are you coming along?

GAUGUIN

I'm almost done.

VINCENT

You work slowly.

GAUGUIN

I work methodically. You, on the other hand, work as if death is just around the corner.

VINCENT

I'm driven to work like Daumier—intensely, to get the emotions on the canvas.

LIZ

Daumier?

ANNIE

Don't you know anything?

LIZ

Don't be an asshole about it, Annie.

MARY

Daumier's a caricaturist, he does some of the lithographs in the paper. Vincent's got his work hanging in the studio.

LIZ

Vincent likes a caricaturist?

ANNIE

He paints too.

MARY

Yeah, he does paintings as well. He loves realism - making his art like a photograph.

LIZ

Why not just take a photograph?

ANNIE

Ask Daumier.

LIZ

Oh sure, I'll just write him a letter.

GAUGUIN

I've finished.

VINCENT

Let me see.

Gauguin shows him.

GAUGUIN

What do you think?

VINCENT

It's very different from what I see. I'm interested in your focus on those three women in the distance of the piece.

GAUGUIN

I felt they evoke an ancient Greek beauty. Paired with the ruins above them, I've brought the beauty of the ancients in harmony with the modern style.

VINCENT

I like that your colors aren't quite exact.

GAUGUIN

Yes, I hate the painters who obsess over the exact shade of this or that. "These mountains were more aqua than cerulean." In the name of God, they were blue, weren't they? Then chuck on some blue and that's enough!

They laugh.

You like it?

VINCENT

Very much, except that you've ignored the factory.

GAUGUIN

You included it?

VINCENT

Yes.

Vincent shows him the painting.

GAUGUIN

But it distracts from the rest of the picture.

VINCENT

That doesn't mean it's not there.

GAUGUIN

You've painted almost precisely what's in front of you.

VINCENT

You must. In the open air, exposed to the wind, to the sun, you work as best as you can, you fill the canvas regardless. Yet that is how you capture the true and the essential—the most difficult part.

GAUGUIN

Vincent, do not paint too much from nature directly. Art is an abstraction; extract from nature while dreaming in front of it.

VINCENT

So you advise painting exclusively from the imagination?

GAUGUIN

Isn't that what art should be?

Pause.

VINCENT

But I have been successful in my approach in a few cases, no? You said you liked my Sunflowers.

GAUGUIN

Those were extraordinary. The colors you used.

VINCENT

There is a language of colors, don't you think? I want to explore it. Whether complementary or opposing, always speaking to one another. There's something fascinating in the mysterious vibrations of kindred tones. Like the Sunflowers in your room, yes?

GAUGUIN

I would have to look at them more carefully to give you a resolute opinion.

Pause.

VINCENT

I'm thinking of coming back here to paint more pictures of this location.

GAUGUIN

I'd be happy to see how they turn out.

VINCENT

You'll come with me?

Beat.

GAUGUIN

Vincent, I'm not suited for outdoor painting like you are.

VINCENT

Oh.

GAUGUIN

I prefer to work by gaslight.

VINCENT

Then we can work inside next time.

GAUGUIN

I'd be happy to.

VINCENT

Portraits?

GAUGUIN

Yes. I'd like to explore the Arlésien folk a bit further.

Liz, Mary, and Annie exit and walk by them, representing a group of Arlesien women.

The women fascinate me especially.

VINCENT

Let's arrange some portraits, then.

GAUGUIN

Let's.

Lights shift to Vincent alone in the studio, writing a letter to Theo. The girls enter and sit or stand at the table around him.

VINCENT

November 5, 1888

Dear Theo,

Gauguin and I went out to les Alyscamps yesterday—the collaboration I have been anticipating! Working side by side on the same subject to produce works that complement and thus enhance each other is refreshing. My little Studio in the South is under way!

Gauguin interests me very much as a man.

MARY

Looks like you've got some competition, Annie.

LIZ (*laughing*)

Good one.

VINCENT

For a long time now it has seemed to me that in our nasty profession of painting we are most sorely in need of men with the hands and the stomachs of workmen; men who have more natural tastes—more loving and more charitable temperaments—than the decadent dandies of the Parisian boulevards. Well, here we are without the slightest doubt in the presence of a virgin creature with savage instincts—the primitive man.

LIZ

Virgin? Somehow I doubt it.

VINCENT (*answering without looking over*)

That's not what I meant.

Surprised, the girls exchange a glance.

With Gauguin, blood and sex prevail over ambition. It pains him so much, however, that he doesn't sell anything, just like other true poets.

With Gauguin's method of keeping track of our money, we have saved up enough to buy a frying pan and some cutlery, so we will be having dinner at home soon! Gauguin is relieved that

we will be spending less at the restaurants now, and I'm sure you will feel the same. I will write again soon. A firm handshake to you.

Ever yours,

Vincent.

P.S. Any word on the trial of the murderer Prado? I know it was supposed to begin today. Gauguin and I have been interested in how everything is proceeding. Please send news as soon as you hear it.

Blackout.

Lights come back up on the walls of the house, shifted to represent one long wall with a door stage left, the outside of a building in Arles. Vincent and Gauguin stand by the window stage right.

VINCENT

What if she says no?

GAUGUIN

Who wouldn't want to get their portrait done?

VINCENT

They're superstitious about it here in Arles.

GAUGUIN

Superstitious?

VINCENT

They believe a record of their image is attracting the attention of the "evil eye".

GAUGUIN

And you still think this is a good idea?

VINCENT

I need to get figures to practice for my next piece.

GAUGUIN

So do I, but if we're going to incur the wrath of Satan in the process-

VINCENT

She's coming, she's coming.

Madame Ginoux, played by Liz wearing a shawl or scarf, enters through the door.

LIZ

Bonjour, Monsieur Gauguin.

GAUGUIN

Hello, Madame.

LIZ

Monsieur Van Gogh.

VINCENT

Hello. Nice to see you.

LIZ

My pleasure.

She begins to leave.

VINCENT

Excuse me, Madame, but-

LIZ

Hm?

VINCENT

What?

LIZ

You were saying something?

GAUGUIN

My friend here was just going to ask you-

VINCENT

I'm going in to get a drink.

Vincent exits through the door.

LIZ

And he needed to ask my permission?

GAUGUIN

No, excuse him, he's a little nervous with strangers.

LIZ

Don't under-state, Monsieur Gauguin, it's not a flattering quality on you.

GAUGUIN (*not serious*)

I'm deeply embarrassed.

LIZ

As you should be.

GAUGUIN

We were wondering if you'd be willing to come pose for us? We'd love to paint you.

LIZ

That's a tempting offer, Monsieur.

GAUGUIN

So you'll do it?

LIZ

Both of you will be there?

GAUGUIN

Yes.

LIZ

That's a shame.

GAUGUIN

A shame?

LIZ

I'll have to keep my clothes on. I know how these things usually go.

GAUGUIN

Maybe we can arrange a more private sitting another time.

LIZ

I'd like that.

GAUGUIN

So, we'll see you tomorrow?

LIZ

I'm looking forward to it, Monsieur.

Liz exits. Vincent enters again, a glass in his hand.

VINCENT

What did she say?

GAUGUIN

We have a taker.

VINCENT

I don't believe it! How?

GAUGUIN

My primitive charm.

VINCENT

Of course, how could I forget.

GAUGUIN

I told her we'll be expecting her tomorrow.

VINCENT

Excellent!

The walls rearrange to become the studio again, and Vincent and Gauguin begin setting up their easels.

I haven't done as many portraits as I would have liked since moving here.

GAUGUIN

Well, we have a start.

VINCENT

Did she say what time to expect her?

A knock at the door.

GAUGUIN

Now, I suppose.

Vincent answers the door and Liz, as Madame Ginoux, sweeps in.

LIZ

I hope I'm not too late.

She notices the easels, half set up.

Or too early.

GAUGUIN

Not at all, come in. It's a pleasure seeing you, as always.

He kisses her hand.

LIZ

The pleasure's all mine.

VINCENT

I can take your coat, if you'd like.

LIZ

Please.

Vincent takes her coat, then uncertainly kisses her hand as well.

Thank you. Where would you like me?

GAUGUIN

Right here, please.

Gauguin places a chair stage left of the table, profile. Liz sits. Gauguin places his own chair directly facing her.

Perfect.

Vincent sees that there is no room for him, and is forced to sit off to the side, facing downstage at her.

VINCENT

Great, yes.

LIZ

How would you like me to sit?

GAUGUIN

Whatever is most comfortable.

Liz places her chin in her upstage hand. It is clear this blocks most of Vincent's view of her face.

Lovely.

LIZ

Now what?

GAUGUIN

Now we paint.

Gauguin and Vincent begin working.

So, how is business at the cafe?

LIZ

Better now that the weather is getting cooler. Everyone wants to be inside, in the warmth.

GAUGUIN

I know I do.

VINCENT

I love the winter.

Pause.

LIZ

What's the reason behind the sailor's costume?

GAUGUIN

It's traditional dress in Brittany-

LIZ

You're not from there, are you?

GAUGUIN

No, I spent some time working there, perfecting my art.

LIZ

That sounds so pleasant.

GAUGUIN

It was. I fell in love with their way of life there, so primitive and earth-bound-

LIZ

Animalistic.

GAUGUIN

Exactly.

LIZ

How interesting.

VINCENT

I find Arles to be like that.

LIZ

You think I'm primitive, Monsieur Van Gogh?

GAUGUIN (*interrupting*)

You're extremely refined.

LIZ

Thank you.

Vincent, frustrated, paints faster.

What brought you out here to Arles, Monsieur Gauguin?

GAUGUIN

Vincent invited me.

LIZ

Did he?

VINCENT

Yes, I-

GAUGUIN

I thought it would be a fun little retreat.

LIZ

I can imagine.

GAUGUIN

Spend some time in the country, teach Vincent a thing or two about art-

LIZ

How sweet of you.

GAUGUIN

I learn from him too, of course. There's a teacher in every being, if you look close enough.

LIZ

Absolutely.

Vincent picks up his canvas and paints and starts to go.

GAUGUIN

Done so soon, Vincent?

VINCENT

I have what I need. Thank you for coming, Madame.

Vincent exits.

GAUGUIN

I apologize. I wish I knew what he was thinking sometimes.

LIZ

Don't worry, we're alone now.

Gauguin stands.

GAUGUIN

You're right.

Liz stands to meet him. They kiss.

LIZ (*mock offended*)

Monsieur Gauguin, I'm a married woman!

GAUGUIN

So am I.

They kiss again. Gauguin breaks away.

Wait, I meant-

LIZ

I know what you meant.

They continue kissing. Suddenly, the sound of a glass breaking from offstage.

LIZ

What was that?

GAUGUIN

It must've been Vincent.

LIZ

I'm sorry, Monsieur, but I have to go now.

GAUGUIN

Wait, I'm sure it was nothing, stay.

LIZ

I really can't, I'm sorry.

GAUGUIN

Will you come back for a private sitting? I'd love to paint you again.

LIZ

I'm sorry, no, I can't.

Liz exits in a rush. Gauguin, frustrated, puts away his easel and paints.

GAUGUIN (*gritted teeth*)

Vincent.

VINCENT (*from offstage*)

What?

Beat. Gauguin thinks better of getting upset.

GAUGUIN

I'll make dinner tonight.

Vincent comes back into the studio.

VINCENT

Thank you.

GAUGUIN

Any time, Corporal.

Vincent begins packing up paints and brushes. Gauguin goes offstage into the kitchen, to start cooking dinner. The girls sit or stand by their walls.

VINCENT

Thank you for cooking tonight.

GAUGUIN

I'm happy to.

VINCENT

You're much better at it than I am.

Gauguin laughs as he comes out of the kitchen.

Without you here, and Theo sending an allowance, I'd starve. I can hardly do anything right. Besides paint, perhaps.

GAUGUIN

And talk.

VINCENT

And talk.

They laugh.

Theo sent me news of Prado, the murderer in Paris.

GAUGUIN

Oh yes?

VINCENT

He's accused of cutting a prostitute's throat and running off with her jewels. But that's not even the most interesting part.

Liz mimes cutting Annie's throat and running off. Annie makes a scene of dying.

CATHERINE

Guys.

LIZ (*innocently*)

What?

GAUGUIN

What's the most interesting part?

VINCENT

I heard that he made the plans to do it in the Café du Tambourin!

GAUGUIN

Of course he did.

VINCENT

What?

GAUGUIN

It's just very convenient you heard that the famous so-called murderer hatched his plot in the café of *La Siccatore*.

Gauguin mimes a large pair of breasts.

VINCENT

Why's that convenient?

GAUGUIN

Because you were in love with the woman!

VINCENT

I was not!

LIZ

Vincent, in *love*?

MARY

I need to hear more.

LIZ (*to Catherine*)

Jealous?

CATHERINE (*pushing her away*)

You wish.

GAUGUIN

So if you weren't in love with the woman, her husband threw you out of the place for sport, then?

VINCENT

Well—

GAUGUIN

Admit it, Vincent. There's no reason to be ashamed of a harmless love affair.

VINCENT

It wasn't an affair.

GAUGUIN

Oh no? Because I certainly heard about one time when—

VINCENT

Alright, perhaps one or two instances of—

GAUGUIN

How do I usually put it? Ah yes, “hygienic excursions”.

LIZ

Ew.

VINCENT

You’re disgusting.

GAUGUIN

You’re disgusting, you dog! She was ten years older than you!

VINCENT

It was a fling!

GAUGUIN

A fling? You were madly in love with her!

He begins to sing.

La Siccatori, la Siccatori—

CATHERINE

He’s mad.

VINCENT

You’re mad.

ANNIE

She’s doing it again.

GAUGUIN

Madly in love with La Siccatori—

CATHERINE

Murderer.

VINCENT

You’re as mad as Prado!

GAUGUIN

What? As mad as a man falsely accused of murder? If innocence is madness, my friend, lock me up!

CATHERINE

Murderer!

ANNIE

Hey, stop that!

VINCENT

I'm sorry, Monsieur Jean Valjean, self-proclaimed defender of outcasts, but this isn't a story. Just because the police believe him guilty doesn't make him innocent.

GAUGUIN

Well, the police are right about everything, I'm sure, so they're bound to have the last word anyway.

VINCENT

Then why bother fussing about it?

GAUGUIN

Don't you believe in redemption, Vincent?

VINCENT/CATHERINE

He's a *murderer!*

GAUGUIN

I'm sorry not everyone can be a saint like you!

Gauguin storms into the kitchen. Vincent continues cleaning. The other girls have subdued Catherine. The lights shift as the scene freezes and Catherine addresses the audience.

CATHERINE

You always hear that a ghost is a soul that has unfinished business on Earth. Do we have unfinished business? That's a question. Maybe. Just one more thing we can't control. Just

another instance of being powerless. This time, though, the liquid that dries up leaves behind a pretty picture.

Not that I wasn't pretty - hell, I made a living at it, didn't I? Still, sliced up isn't anyone's best look. You think you'd miss your body, but I don't. Too much pain. Vincent shouldn't feel the same way, but he does.

The others go along with it, they don't mind being here. Annie likes being around Gauguin. I don't like it much, feeling out of control, out of space. Zola said "Everything has a beginning for want of an end," but when the soul doesn't end, can it at least rest?

Don't have unfinished business.

Pause.

Don't get murdered.

The lights shift again as the scene continues. Gauguin returns with two plates of food.

GAUGUIN

Dinner's ready.

Vincent and Gauguin both sit and begin to eat, not looking up from their meals.

CATHERINE *(to the other girls)*

What did I do?

Vincent squeezes his eyes shut.

GAUGUIN

The portrait sitting went well today.

MARY

You yelled again. You weren't yourself.

GAUGUIN

Madame Ginoux was very kind to come in.

CATHERINE

I'm sorry-

GAUGUIN

I think I'll use her for a painting of the café I've been thinking about. What do you think?

VINCENT (*quiet, echoing Catherine*)

I'm sorry.

GAUGUIN

What?

VINCENT

What?

GAUGUIN

You said you were sorry.

VINCENT

Oh, it's nothing.

Pause.

GAUGUIN

Is it alright if I use Madame Ginoux as a model for my painting of the cafe?

VINCENT

Sounds fine.

Pause.

GAUGUIN

You did a full canvas of her, no? That was impressive. I've never seen you work faster, you were using your brush like a shovel. You were done in, what, an hour?

VINCENT

Forty-five minutes.

GAUGUIN

Good for you.

Long pause.

VINCENT

Theo mentioned you in his letter.

CATHERINE (*in Vincent's head again*)

Don't say it.

ANNIE

What?

GAUGUIN

Yes?

VINCENT

Your painting *Breton Girls in a Ring* sold for 500 francs.

CATHERINE

Bastard.

MARY (*in Vincent's head now too*)

That much? How?

GAUGUIN

You're kidding! For 500 francs? Who bought it?

VINCENT

A man named Dupuis, some collector.

CATHERINE

Why not Vincent's art?

MARY

It's good enough,

CATHERINE

Better than good enough.

ANNIE

Mary-

LIZ

She's doing it now, too?

GAUGUIN

That's incredible! Finally someone wants my work!

VINCENT

Congratulations.

GAUGUIN

Any news on your paintings yet?

CATHERINE

Bastard.

ANNIE

Hey now.

VINCENT

Nothing yet.

GAUGUIN

I'm sorry.

VINCENT

I will keep producing. I find it to be a necessity, even to the extent of being morally crushed and physically drained by it. I cannot help that my pictures do not sell.

CATHERINE

They won't sell.

MARY

They could sell.

GAUGUIN

They will sell.

VINCENT

What does it matter if they do? At this rate, no amount of paintings sold can pay my debts.

GAUGUIN (*unsure, incredulous*)

You're not giving up?

CATHERINE

Never.

MARY

Never.

VINCENT (*this has never been and will never be an option*)

Never.

GAUGUIN

Good.

Vincent begins to clean up the dinner plates, heading into the kitchen with them.

Thank you.

Gauguin reaches to get the newspaper and begins to read.

ANNIE

Are you guys done?

LIZ

Don't say it like that. I don't think they can control it.

Catherine and Mary don't respond. Vincent re-enters with a letter.

VINCENT

You didn't mention there's a letter here for me.

GAUGUIN

Oh, I meant to. It's from La revue indépendante.

VINCENT

They're inviting me to exhibit in a showing they have coming up.

GAUGUIN

A Paris exhibition. Not bad.

VINCENT

Signac will be showing there.

LIZ

Hey!

MARY

That's pretty good.

GAUGUIN

Seurat too, probably.

VINCENT

I imagine so.

GAUGUIN

Are you going to do it?

MARY

Yes.

CATHERINE

Yes!

VINCENT

No. I want to stay here and try my hand at some paintings from memory.

GAUGUIN

That's good. They're a bunch of pretentious idiots anyway.

VINCENT

Yes?

GAUGUIN

Yes. A few years ago Signac offered to let me use his studio, but that ingrate Seurat refused to let me in.

VINCENT

That's awful.

GAUGUIN

And now he's the renowned innovator of color, with his *petit point*. It's better suited for cushions or wallpaper than galleries, I say. There's no vivacity to it, no emotion.

VINCENT

Maybe there's some validity to Signac's work, though?

GAUGUIN

If he's following Seurat's lead at all? None.

VINCENT

I see.

Pause. Gauguin continues to read the paper.

GAUGUIN

My God.

VINCENT

What is it?

GAUGUIN

There's a report about Jack the Ripper in here.

The girls freeze.

VINCENT

Another victim?

GAUGUIN

Catherine Eddowes. They found her hacked to pieces, with one of her ears cut completely off.

VINCENT

How awful.

GAUGUIN

Listen to this—he sent the police a letter beforehand: “The next job I do I shall clip the lady’s ears off and send to the police officers just for jolly...” I need to go have a smoke.

Gauguin gets up and gets his pipe before heading out the door. Vincent picks up the newspaper and looks at the article. Lights shift as Mary addresses the audience.

MARY

I remember fading. Isn’t that terrible? Nobody should experience that, yet everyone does at some point. After that, it’s mostly just a matter of time before being forgotten. I think he gets remembered, though, because people admire his creative expression. It’s the same as art, isn’t it? We were just materials, our bodies at least, same as the knives. He’s leaving something behind. Most don’t. Something to be admired in the bid for immortality, so I don’t blame anyone for their fascination.

Pause.

It’s not like Gauguin or Vincent’s art is any less fatal.

Lights shift back to normal as the scene resumes.

ANNIE

Her ear?

CATHERINE (*touching her ear*)

That’s what he said.

Vincent touches his own ear nervously, puts down the paper and leaves the room.

LIZ

I’m sorry, what just happened?

MARY

I’m not sure.

CATHERINE

I don’t like having Gauguin here.