

The Reluctant Martyr

Genre: Historical tragedy
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SYNOPSIS:

This 10 minute play is inspired by the **Jesuit Friedrich SPEE** [1591-1635], a professor of logic at Padaborn University, poet, songwriter and author of *Precautions for Prosecutors* and the *Golden Book of Virtues*. In 1630, SPEE was still a young Jesuit acting as confessor to imprisoned witches in Würzburg, Germany. SPEE is not only disheartened with his inability to stop the hysterical and unjust prosecution of witches but suddenly realizes he has fallen deeply in love with one of the condemned. Through prayer and self-dialogue, Spee tries to make sense of her death and a confusing number of recent personal tragedies. His destiny rests on determining whether these events were initiated by God or by the Devil.

CAST OF CHARACTERS:

FRIEDRICH SPEE: Jesuit. 20-40 years old, dressed in 1630 Catholic professor's attire [looks like a black house coat].



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ALMA: [Optional, can be replaced with mannequin.] Beautiful, but deceased, young woman condemned to be executed as a witch.

SET REQUIREMENTS: Stage Right: Jail cell with Cot and blanket for ALMA. Large cross on prison wall that is easily removed and thrown to the floor. Large Cross on necklace worn by SPEE and Rosary beads for ALMA. Center Stage: Sound effects. Stage Left: SPEE's room with entry door, table and chair, books, small picture framed mirror (i.e. for shaving) that can be used when SPEE is speaking to himself, cutlery, silver painted paper cup (with material inserted at bottom [glue or Styrofoam] to make it possible for the cup to be tossed 15 feet without injury to audience).

[At Rise:]

[SPEE upon entering prison cell to administer last rites to a convicted witch discovers her strangled.]

SPEE:

It is not true. She can't be dead. [Stunned.] It must be a dream.

[Walks to cot and sits next to ALMA's dead body, still stunned. Touches her.]

SPEE:

Oh, God have mercy. I am awake,

[NOTE: *Look up, at least briefly every time you speak directly to God.*]

SPEE:

Why **her** God? Those witch mongers broke her neck before I could give her last rites. They stole her innocence, her life **and** her salvation.

[With anger.]

SPEE:

Tell me what I can do to have You end the corruption rampant in witch trials. They should all be sent to a fiery hell; every one of them. Please God, let me have this revenge. Appoint me as your Inquisitor. I will investigate every ruler, judge, and executioner who uses torture. I will cleanse Germany of this horrendous plight. I will foil the Devil's ploy to decimate your pious innocents with this trumped up hysteria.

[Sees cross on the wall and jumps up, tearing it down.]

SPEE:

How dare they put a sign of Your mercy and love into this Hell Hole, it is sacrilegious. They are all heretics and the **true** agents of the Devil.

[Paces, forlorn, he tries reasoning with God. Look up.]

SPEE:

Merciful Father. Do you not see they are sending your beloved flock up in ashes, and, they are doing it for their own profit. I know many are simply ignorant but still they have no right to receive salvation or Your forgiveness. Have You heard a single one of these professed men of God accuse themselves or ask forgiveness in their confessions? [Pause.] **I have not.** They deserve the same horrendous fiery end as their victims. Surely, You would agree with me on this.

[Paces across floor and sits on cot. Look up.]

SPEE:

Dear Father; Clearly, You allow these witch trials for some reason. I know You want witches eliminated. Still You have to know the courts are killing way more innocents, like this girl ALMA. You are a compassionate God. You wouldn't condemn her to further torment after death. Would You? She was not a witch, this girl was one of Your most virtuous and loyal servants. She was an orphan. I found her working at the hospital bringing food to the sick and comforting the dying. I, yes I, converted her to Your faith and baptised her. She was falsely accused of causing the deaths patients there by that despicable leech of a man she rejected.

Oh God. It is not ALMA's fault she died before I could administer last rites. It is her malicious accuser who is liable for her lost soul. And the jailor who **obviously** strangled her this morning. Then he lied, thinking me a fool, and blamed the devil instead. An excuse readily accepted no doubt by his cohorts.

[Pause. Mournful.]

Yes, it is even my fault for delaying my visit this morning. I am a fool. What does a girl about to face burning at the stake care if I am shaven and washed? No, now I am lying, I didn't care about my looks, I was just avoiding the inevitable fate of walking this poor soul to her execution.

[Dejected. Gets onto knees next to ALMA to plead. Look up.]

SPEE:

Please Almighty God, I beg of You. Take ALMA into your loving arms and heal the wounds suffered here upon her body. Please grant her the heavenly salvation she deserves.

[Pause]

I ask nothing of you for myself, but for Alma and those innocent souls still to be victims of these corrupt witch trials. If it is Your will that I stop this massacre of innocents, I need your guidance. These monsters have burned young children 3 and 4 years of age accusing them of intercourse with the Devil. I am forlorn and utterly lost. I will do anything you desire. It can **not** only be me who is begging You to intervene. Does not Mother Germany herself cry out to you in sorrow to protect her innocent?

[Stands, and paces. Angry.]

SPEE:

Why have I been assigned to render alms in this city of vile immoral Christians? I requested a missionary assignment to India where I hoped to start a church of pure decent Catholics, not tarnished by our politics and greed. This was to be my gift to You, a destiny for which I felt You would approve. You did not, for my transfer was denied and I was sent here instead. You must have some purpose in assigning as confessor to witches. Don't You see I am of no use to these poor souls. Am I here to save them from the Devil? What tools have You given me? Exorcism? I used it.

The accused are innocent pious women, I tell You there was no insidious evil spirit of which to purge. Still they are sent to the stake one after another.

Do You not feel sadness, do you not suffer pain as you watch your faithful servants torn limb from limb; burned, mutilated, their bones crushed? Even if a few are truly witches; far more are innocent. Does not Your own “Parable of the Weeds” [*Matthew 13:24-30*] admonish us that some of the guilty must be allowed freedom, so that the innocent are not condemned.

[Sit next to ALMA.]

SPEE:

Why does my heart ache so much more for this one condemned witch? Did I fall in love with her beauty? Yes, she is beautiful; but it was her kindness and charity that captured my heart. She loved me and told me so even knowing the two of us could never share a life together. She often said that with a single kiss we could consummate our eternal love. She would ask no more, I would still be true to my vows of celibacy. Yet, I denied her this one token of my love. I told her God would see us and know in my heart I would lust for more.

[Look up.]

SPEE:

Oh Lord, You know the distress I suffered in denying her this request. The total anguish I suffer now for not kissing her then. Those sad eyes are now forever carved into my memory. Eyes that beseeched me to show my love just once. Here I hold this bruised, broken, and lifeless girl in my arms. Now that it is too late for her to know the depth of my love. Please God understand that I have to grant her that symbolic gesture of love, a consummation of the love for which she so yearned. Love, as an orphan, she never received. I could not let her depart this world without replacing her visions of horrific suffering with this kiss, her final request. Forgive me.

[Cradle her head and kiss ALMA. Cry. Lay her gently down.]

SPEE:

My lovely ALMA. I see you still hold the rosary beads I carved for you.

[Take rosary beads and put around neck.]

SPEE:

I will now wear them as a symbol of our love, a love forbidden in life. Dear ALMA, I must leave you now and with God’s grace we will join each other in heaven. I promise I will not rest until I save your eternal soul, [pause and quietly] or lose mine trying.

[Begin exit- approx. 1 meter, Close door to cell. Turn for last look. Walk to middle of stage and look out past audience—like looking down a long narrow street.]

[SOUNDS: raging fire, a scream and people murmuring.]

SPEE:

See ALMA, there [Point] the wretched executioner is executing the other victim in a fire meant for you both. Well, you cheated him and his spectators of their perverse joy in seeing you burn.

[Lowers head.]

And my love, you saved me from a pain I might not have been able to endure.

[Walks to Stage Left to enter his room and sits at his desk.]

[Pause and with anger, swipes silverware and books onto the floor and throws cup into audience. Jumps up and paces. Screams and pleadingly raises arms upward toward heaven.]

SPEE:

Why God, why?

[Sit and look into mirror to speak to himself.]* *

SPEE:

Stop Friedrich, Stop. You can't let your fiery passion cause you to sin against others. Not all judges are guilty. Retribution is God's, not yours. You must think. God gifted you with a rational mind. You are a Jesuit trained in logic. There has to be a reason for your ill-fate, this is what you teach at university.

[Pause, NOTE: *Look in mirror each tie Friedrich Spee addresses himself.*

SPEE:

Think. The most probable reason for God allowing your suffering is that you have transgressed against Him. He could be behind the assassination attempt on you last year. Was He making way for your replacement? Someone more capable of doing His will. But how might you have sinned? It would have to be something more serious than your daily transgressions.

[Pause, Look into mirror.]

SPEE:

Friedrich, you don't deserve God's love or even ALMA's. You are a traitor to both.

Didn't God's own clergy call your beloved ALMA a stinking whore from the pulpit when she was convicted? You sat in silence seething inside, but said nothing in her defence. You are a coward unworthy of her love.

[Jump up. Pace.]

SPEE:

Damn that preacher. Damn me. She is not a whore, she is a pious virgin. I am a man of God, I could not possibly fall so desperately in love with a whore. My love for this girl is a sin but it is not **her** sin. If God's vows permitted marriage to a woman, she, and no other, would be my bride.

[Look up.]

SPEE:

Oh Dear God, have I betrayed my vows in loving ALMA this way, even if only in spirit? Did the Devil send this beautiful girl to break my will and my vows to You. Did he win me to his side with her death? Because now given the choice, I would trade my life for hers.

[Pause. Sit down. Look into mirror.]

SPEE:

Calm down Friedrich. This is not logical. This love, this carnal sin that weakens your soul, is only recent. It is a sin of the flesh and you should be punished, but it is not a mortal sin. Could your assignment to this prison for Devil worshippers, the assassination attempt on your life last year, and falling in love with a condemned witch really all be instigated by God? Or was it at the hands of the Devil? If by God, for what reason? Is He testing your faith; your devotion under adversity?

[Grabs hair with fist. Looks up.]

SPEE:

Oh God! Does not my premature grey hair manifest the inner torture I endure for You? My guts bleed, my legs tremble and still I walk the innocents to the stake. I give the condemned their last rites and remind them of Your love and a hope for salvation. Is this not evidence of my allegiance to You?

I have never been so tested. My spirit is weakened by this forbidden love but still I remain true to my vows. Do you feel I failed You? How will you judge me?

[Pause, lowers head. Looks into mirror.]

SPEE:

No Friedrich, if it were God who sent the assassin to kill you He would have succeeded. Think, if your destiny was not to die, what reason would God have had to inflict near mortal wounds on you? Perhaps it was punishment for your cowardly act of running away from your assignment here as confessor to the condemned? You know that was the only reason you were alone in the forest without protection. You deserved that beating. But maybe it was more. I could be a lesson from God to make you empathize with the injuries of the condemned witches? God knows you die a million deaths for every one of His flock you accompany to the stake. Still there is a

reason He wants you there. No, it does make sense that God would want you dead. The Apostle Paul said, God is faithful, and he will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you can endure... [1 Cor. 10:13] God wants something else, but what is it?

[Look in mirror.]

SPEE:

Then perhaps it was not God. Could the Devil then be responsible for your torture and assassination attempt? You know the Devil makes no such promise of reprieve from tribulation. If his temptations fail he would gladly, and with vengeance, have the faithful suffer an agonising death.

[Stand]

But why would the Devil torment me? For what purpose? Is capturing the soul of a Jesuit the Devil's ultimate affront to God? Perhaps. Is it so important as to have me killed? Did God rescue me from the Devil's assassin? Was it God who lead me, mortally wounded, out of the forest and healed me to serve some divine purpose? Could the Devil have known of such a destiny and tried to spoil it?

[Pause.]

Then why kill ALMA? Why murder her before she could do penance and partake of the Eucharist? Who really broke her neck? Was it the Devil behind it? Was it his revenge upon me for not succumbing to temptation? Was it his punishment for ALMA in failing to seduce me? Or was her death only the jailor acting out of pity. Not being Catholic, the jailor would not understand the importance of her receiving the Last Rites, he would only think of saving her from the agony of being burned alive.

[Look up.]

SPEE:

Oh God! Was ALMA's death suffered before receiving Last Rites Your punishment for my sin? Have I brought this fate upon an innocent girl?

[Pounds chest to punish himself. Seated with head bowed. Picks up mirror.]

SPEE:

No Friedrich, this would not be God's punishment, He is compassionate. But He did not prevent ALMA's fate either. Why? What reason would God have for her death, for your near mortal injuries, for being assigned here to give Last Rites to condemned witches? Are these events all connected?

It is a riddle, a puzzle easily solved if you were not so tattered of body and forlorn of spirit. You are too desperate for an answer. You must beseech God and let Him guide you to your answer.

[Kneel.]

SPEE:

Yes I must.

[Look up]

Please Almighty and Merciful God, please forgive me my sins. I open my heart, mind and soul to You for guidance. Please tell me what destiny awaits me, a Jesuit to whom You have revealed a great injustice perpetrated in Your name? The destiny of one who has been inflicted with the physical pain suffered by those condemned to torture. The destiny of one who has been hopelessly bonded by love to a witch so intense that I would welcome death myself. What do You want me to see, to understand?

I again willing dedicate myself to You, this time through a baptism in my own tears.

[Pause. Stand.]

Yes, my prayers are working, I feel God's Holy Spirit upon me. He is answering my prayer. This debilitating fog of uncertainty is clearing. I should have been asking, what good comes of knowing of an injustice and empathy for its victims if it is not acted upon? I saw the truth, but like others I let the knowledge become diluted with fear. I let my empathy stay locked away in my heart.

[Look up]

It is my fault that You had to embolden and vitalize me this way. You have dressed me in spiritual armour to protect me in Your battle against evil. You have given me a sharp intellect, a weapon to use against the treacherous shepherds entrusted with Your flock.

You have intended for these events to prod me into action. To willingly suffer for this cause, to even face death. To be Your **martyr**; this was always my destiny. But I blindly fought against You because I was weak. Other priests, more prominent than I, have been imprisoned and tortured for exposing these injustices, nineteen have even been burned as witches. True, not all have failed, Brother Frias succeeded in Spain.

It is no longer the torture I may face of having my bones broken on the rack, crushed on the wheel, or even molten lead poured down my throat. No; much worse would be forever being branded a heretic, an enemy of my beloved Church and rejected by You. Would I sing one of the beautiful hymns I wrote and dedicated to You as I burned? Would I stay faithful and true to my destiny? Would I show the same courage and dedication on the stake as Joan of Arc who kept her gaze upon Your cross as she burned? Would You redeem my honourable name as You did hers?

[Face audience. Holds up and looks at ALMA's rosary cross. Bright light shines on SPEE as he has his epiphany.]

Yes, I will. Gone is my passion for converting the pagans of India. I swear to You I will speak openly against a legal system that allows inquisitors to run rampant with impunity. I will publish a book exposing their injustice. If, like my Christian brothers, I am to suffer a martyr's fiery death, and labelled a heretic, so be it. My

books will outlive there evil so that someday people will open their eyes and end this insane madness. I will join all those falsely condemned with You in heaven and we will watch as these henchmen of Satan join him in eternal damnation.

THE END.

EPILOGUE:

Friedrich Spee dies five years later of an infection at the age of 44 after distinguished himself during the 30 Year War at a Trier hospital in care of the suffering. His writings critically exposing the injustices and corruption found in witch trials did not end the atrocities but did reduced their use of torture. His "Trutznachtigall", a collection of sacred songs, is still used today.