

THE TRIAL OF JOHN VIANNEY
By Dale Ahlquist

Cast of Characters

14 Females; 11 Males; 25 Either

<u>MONSIGNOR DULAC:</u>	Vicar General.
<u>MANDY:</u>	Mayor of Ars.
<u>FR. JOHN VIANNEY:</u>	Curé of Ars.
<u>GEORGES TOURNIER:</u>	A Farmer.
<u>ANDRES VERCHERE:</u>	A Wheelwright.
<u>FRANCOIS BOURDIN:</u>	A Businessman.
<u>DR. MAURICE SAUNIER:</u>	A doctor.
<u>LIVGARD:</u>	A Free Thinker.
<u>LATROBE:</u>	A Pilgrim.
<u>FR. RAYMOND:</u>	A priest.
<u>DURAND:</u>	A Villager.
<u>SISTER COTILDE:</u>	A sister.
<u>MADAM BIBOST:</u>	A Widow.
<u>COUNTESS DES GARETS:</u>	A countess.
<u>CATHERINE LASSAGNE:</u>	A woman who helps Fr. Vianney.
<u>MARIE FILLIAT:</u>	A woman who helps Fr. Vianney.
<u>JEANNE-MARIE CHANEY:</u>	A sinner who comes to Fr. Vianney to repent.
<u>GIRL IN STREET:</u>	A girl who makes accusations against Fr. Vianney.
<u>WIDOW:</u>	A Pilgrim.
<u>MOTHER MARIE VERONIQUE:</u>	A Pilgrim.
<u>MADEMOISELLE LAFONTAINE:</u>	A Pilgrim.

<u>MADAM CLAYMONTE:</u>	A Pilgrim.
<u>FLORIN:</u>	A Villager.
<u>WOMAN/GRAPPIN:</u>	The <i>grappin</i> .
<u>WOMAN IN SACRISTY:</u>	A woman who looks like the Virgin Mary.
<u>FIDDLER:</u>	The village fiddler.
<u>8 VILLAGERS:</u>	Villagers of Ars.
<u>7 PILGRIMS</u>	Pilgrims who visit Fr. Vianney.
<u>9 PENITENTS:</u>	Penitents who go to Fr. Vianney for confession.

ACT I

Scene 1 - An office in Fr. Vianney's school.

Scene 2 - Rectory inferior.

Scene 3 - Dance hall.

Scene 4 - Dance hall.

Scene 5 - Confessional screen.

Scene 6 - A room in Vianney's house.

Scene 7 - Vianney's bedroom.

ACT II

Scene 1 - Dark stage, the woods.

Scene 2 - Confessional screen.

Scene 3 - A repeat of Act II Scene 1, dark stage, the woods.

Approximate Length

120 minutes

Time

1800's

Place

Ars, France

ACT I
Scene 1

Setting: At one extreme end of the stage are a table and chairs. There are papers and a pen and inkwell on the table. This will be the ongoing “Interview” scene and the action will move back and forth from the main stage to the Interview. At the opposite end, also apart from the main stage, is an elevated pulpit.

At Rise: The lights come up on MONSIGNOR DULAC seated at the Interview table.

(Enter SISTER COTILDE)

COTILDE

May I help you, Father? I’m Sister Cotilde.

DULAC

(Rises)

Monsignor Dulac.

COTILDE

(Correcting herself)

Forgive me. Monsignor.

DULAC

The Vicar General.

COTILDE

Oh! I’m terribly sorry. I should have known...or...should I have known?

DULAC

Think nothing of it, Sister. You do not know me and you did not know I was coming.

COTILDE

Have you come to see the Curé?

DULAC

(They both sit)

Eventually. But first I have come to see you.

COTILDE

Me, Monsignor?

DULAC

You. And others.

COTILDE

What is the reason for your visit?

DULAC

The Bishop has received certain...complaints about the Curé. I am here to investigate.

COTILDE

Complaints? About John Marie Baptiste Vianney? Has the devil sent these complaints?

DULAC

(Smiles)

Perhaps the devil has sent *me*. But I'm afraid I must ask some rather probing questions. And I must ask you to be completely forthcoming in your answers.

COTILDE

I will tell you everything. Everything I know. I will be only too happy to tell you about Fr. Vianney. Where would you like me to begin?

DULAC

Where else but at the beginning?

COTILDE

(Church bell)

I was not here the day he arrived in Ars. But I can tell you what happened that day.

(Pause. Church bell.)

Nothing.

(FADEOUT. Church bell continues, lights come up on main stage. People passing each other. One villager stops and looks up.)

1st VILLAGER

So. There is a new priest.

(Lowers head, continues walking. FADEOUT as church bell continues to chime. Lights back up on Interview.)

COTILDE

I don't think anyone else even looked up. There was no interest in the new priest because there was no interest in the faith. As for the priest, the first place he went...was to his knees.

(FADEOUT. Lights come up on VIANNEY, kneeling for a long time before he finally speaks.)

VIANNEY

I thank you Lord that you have given me only a small field to harvest.

(FADEOUT. Lights back up on Interview.)

COTILDE

It *was* a small field. There were only 200 people in Ars when he arrived. He immediately began to pray for them. He spent hours before the altar. Kneeling on the bare floor. No rail. No support. It would become a familiar position for him.

FADEOUT

Scene 2

Setting: Rectory Interior.

At Rise: Men carrying furniture in. Enter COUNTESS, an elegant noblewoman, and BIBOST, a widow and common woman.

COUNTESS

Who have they sent us?

BIBOST

His name is John Vianney.

COUNTESS

What's he like?

BIBOST

He appears to be starving.

COUNTESS

He's going to need a lot of help.

BIBOST

Countess, we are the ones who need help.

(Enter MAYOR, dodging between the furniture-movers)

MAYOR

Good morning, Countess!

COUNTESS

Mr. Mayor!

MAYOR

I've come to welcome the new priest.

COUNTESS

I notice the town council has not accompanied you...because...

MAYOR

...because, as you suspect, they don't know I'm here. But where is the priest?

BIBOST

He's in the church, Mr. Mayor. I spoke with him about an hour ago. He still hasn't set foot in the rectory. But I told him he must come and...

(Enter VIANNEY)

VIANNEY

I am Father Vianney.

MAYOR

Welcome to Ars, Father. I am Mayor Mandy. And this is Countess Marie Ann Colombe Garnier des Garets.

COUNTESS

Forgive me for all those names, Father.

MAYOR

The Countess lives in the chateau above the village.

VIANNEY

You are a noblewoman.

COUNTESS

Yes, Father.

VIANNEY

How did you escape having your property seized during the Terror?

MAYOR

(Before she can answer)

The Terror never reached Ars. In fact, the Republic is still making its way here. In any case, the Countess is well-loved in this village. She has always been generous to the poor and has done everything she can for the welfare of the people here. Everyone appreciates her.

BIBOST

And she is a faithful Catholic. But no one appreciates that.

COUNTESS

Ars is not a faithful place, Father. It is not that they hate the Catholic Church. They simply do not care. I am hoping you will bring them back to the Church. I will do everything I can to help.

VIANNEY

I am grateful for your assistance, Countess.

COUNTESS

I have provided...

VIANNEY

What happened to my predecessor? The previous Curé?

(The others exchange glances)

COUNTESS

I would have thought you knew.

VIANNEY

I'm afraid I don't.

BIBOST

He quit. He didn't just quit Ars. He quit the Church. Lost his faith. Not even a priest anymore.

VIANNEY

I see.

COUNTESS

Perhaps it was our fault.

VIANNEY

It was not your fault.

COUNTESS

But I think we could have shown more support. As I say, I will do everything I can to help you. I have provided some furniture for the rectory.

VIANNEY

Thank you for the furnishings. All very lovely. But I must ask you to take them back to your chateau.

(The movers stop and look up)

COUNTESS

But Father...

VIANNEY

I have no need of them. I only need a bed, a table, a chair, a cooking pot, and a spoon.

COUNTESS

But you must entertain guests. Visiting priests, visiting dignitaries. Perhaps the Bishop will come someday.

VIANNEY

I must serve my flock. I must feed them. We are going to bring them back to the Church, but it won't be done by putting on a show. It won't be done by entertaining people. Priests or anyone else.

MAYOR

There will be no need to entertain anyone if they do not come.

VIANNEY

They will come. They will come. But they will not be entertained. Now, if you will excuse me, I must go back into the church and continue my prayers. Good morning.

(Exit VIANNEY)

(They pause, a little stunned. The movers are not moving, but waiting for instructions.)

COUNTESS

He's right. Take the furniture back to the Chateau.

(The men sigh and start removing the furniture)

If there are any social obligations to fill, I can fill them. This priest has his mind on better things.

(FADEOUT)

(Lights up on Interview with BIBOST who has left the main stage)

BIBOST

I am Madam Bibost. A widow. I am his housekeeper. There is not much to keep.

DULAC

What does he do in the house?

BIBOST

He is hardly there long enough to do anything.

DULAC

Do you ever see him?

BIBOST

I never see him, except in church. He insists that I am never present in the rectory while he is there. So I wait for him to leave each day before I enter to clean up. And as I say, there is not much to clean up.

(She looks both ways, and then leans closer in confidence)

But I do his laundry, you know.

DULAC

Yes?

BIBOST

The...left shoulder of his shirt. It...it is always stained with blood.

DULAC

Do you have any idea why?

BIBOST

Yes, I think I do.

(She makes the motion of self-flagellation)

He never lets himself get too comfortable.

(FADEOUT. Lights come up on VIANNEY in the pulpit.)

VIANNEY

(With great energy)

Beware if you are not tempted. It means the demons don't even bother with you. Why should they waste their time and energy dragging you into hell, when you are sliding in all by yourself? If you are being tempted, rejoice! It means that you are good for God. It means the demons want to prevent you from doing some great work that God has for you. Temptation is an opportunity for grace, for God to conquer evil. But you will never conquer the temptation by giving in to it. Only by resisting it. Give yourself only to God. Only to God.

(FADEOUT. Lights up on Interview with GEORGES TOURNIER and DULAC.)

TOURNIER

I am Georges Tournier. I'm a farmer.

DULAC

What was your first impression of Fr. Vianney?

TOURNIER

My first impression? I first met him when he showed up at my home one day. It was right at mealtime. But he would not take a seat at the table to join us. Just stood for several minutes making friendly conversation.

DULAC

What did he talk about?

TOURNIER

Ordinary topics. He didn't mention religion. He spoke sense. About land and plows and cattle. He also knew about sheep. He knew how to treat hoof-rot. He understood what it was like to work a field under the hot sun, but also to watch flocks under the stars. He asked my wife questions about her garden. He was very familiar with potatoes. He asked the names and the ages of the children. My son Pierre had whooping cough, and the Curé suggested some treatments, which worked, as it turned out.

DULAC

Did he visit your neighbors?

TOURNIER

As far as I know, he visited every family in Ars in those first weeks after he arrived. And they all had the same... first impression, as you say.

DULAC

And you say he didn't talk about religion.

TOURNIER

No.

(Pauses)

Well. Just before he left he asked the children one or two questions.

DULAC

What questions?

TOURNIER

Well, he asked them if they could name all seven sacraments.

DULAC

And?

TOURNIER

And I was thinking to myself, I didn't know there were seven sacraments. My daughter Isabel said singing.

DULAC

Singing?

TOURNIER

She said singing was one of the sacraments. I wish she'd at least said praying.

DULAC

You understand that praying is not a...

TOURNIER

Yes, yes! Though the Curé didn't seem too upset by Isabel's answer. He just suggested that we bring the children into the village once a week for catechism classes.

DULAC

And did you?

TOURNIER

Yes...we did.

DULAC

Anything else?

TOURNIER

He said I shouldn't work on Sundays.

DULAC

I thought you said he didn't talk about religion.

TOURNIER

That must have been later. He kept coming around. You were asking about first impressions, not what happened later. My first impression was that I liked him immediately. I told my wife so. I said, "He is a peasant. He is one of us."

DULAC

But later?

TOURNIER

(Moving his head, thinking about what he is going to say)

There was a time when I didn't like him at all. But...

DULAC

But?

TOURNIER

That changed, too.

(FADEOUT. Lights up on VIANNEY in pulpit.)

VIANNEY

(Again, with great energy)

God has given us bread for our bodies. He has given us *his* body for our souls. You are very pleased by the bread he gives. Why do you refuse his body? Sunday is God's property. It is his own day. It is the Lord's Day. He has made all the days of the week. He might have kept them all, but he has given you six days and has reserved for himself only one. That day is his, not yours. What right do you have to touch what is not yours?

FADEOUT

Scene 3

Setting: Dance Hall.

At Rise: Fiddle music. The villagers are engaged in country-dancing that is getting raucous, with JEANNE-MARIE CHANEY in the midst of it, attracting the most attention. Those who are not dancing are laughing and cackling and acting a bit drunk. Everyone is acting stupid.

3rd VILLAGER

It's the worst fiddle music I've ever heard!

CHANEY

We're not here for a concert!

1st VILLAGER

Do you know what I heard about the new priest?

4th VILLAGER

We have a new priest?

2nd VILLAGER

What did you hear?

4th VILLAGER

That we have a new priest!

2nd VILLAGER

No, Idiot!

(To 1st VILLAGER)

What did you hear about the new priest?

1st VILLAGER

I heard he's not very smart.

5th VILLAGER

It's true! He passed his classes with the lowest possible marks.

6th VILLAGER

If he was smart, they wouldn't have sent him to Ars.

(Laughter)

3rd VILLAGER

If he was smart, he wouldn't be a priest!

(Laughter. The intensity of the dance increases. JEANNE-MARIE CHANEY is center-stage. She removes her bonnet and swings it around and swirls her hair back-and-forth, much to the delight of the men, who hoot and holler.)

7th VILLAGER

Jeanne-Marie, come dance with me!

8th VILLAGER

She's dancing with me!

7th VILLAGER

You've danced with her long enough!

(A fight breaks out, and everyone urges it on. FADEOUT. Lights come up on VIANNEY in pulpit.)

VIANNEY

(As before)

The cabaret is the devil's shop, the school where hell pours forth, the place where souls are put up for sale, where families are ruined, where health is spoilt, where quarrels begin, where murders are committed, and where God is blasphemed. You miss Mass, but you never miss a dance. When you go into the dance hall, you leave your guardian angel at the door. The angel's place is taken by a devil. And soon the room is filled with as many devils as dancers.

(FADEOUT. Lights come up on CATHERINE LASSAGNE, alone on stage. Enter VIANNEY.)

VIANNEY

May I help you?

LASSAGNE

May I help *you*, Father? I am Catherine Lassagne, and I want to serve the Church.

VIANNEY

Have you considered the religious life?

LASSAGNE

I want to serve the church here in Ars. Now. Please don't send me away to a convent.

VIANNEY

If God has sent you to me, I will not send you away.

LASSAGNE

Tell me what I can do for you.

VIANNEY

You can help me start a school for girls. The most beautiful task anyone can perform in this world is the Christian education of youth.

(FADEOUT. LASSAGNE leaves the main stage and crosses to the Interview with DULAC.)

LASSAGNE

So I helped him start a school. We acquired a building just across the square from the rectory, and got classrooms all set up, and we opened. There was only one problem, as I saw it.

DULAC

What was that?

LASSAGNE

There were no students.

DULAC

He opened a school with no students.

LASSAGNE

He said we would get the students, but he wanted to have the school ready for them when they came. The next step, he said, was to get the town ready for the school.

DULAC

And how did he propose to do that?

LASSAGNE

That is exactly what I asked him.

(FADEOUT. She leaves the Interview and returns to the mainstage, where VIANNEY is.)

LASSAGNE

Father, how do you propose to do that?

VIANNEY

Prayer and fasting.

(FADEOUT. Lights up on Interview with BIBOST.)

BIBOST

Oh, he fasts! Let me tell you. There must be a lot of a certain kind of demon in Ars, because the Curé is always saying, "These kinds of demons are only cast out by prayer and fasting." He goes without food. Which gives him more time for prayer. And he goes without sleep. Which gives him more time for prayer.

But surely he eats something!

DULAC

Potatoes. At the beginning of the week, he boils some potatoes for the whole week. By the end of the week, some of them are rotten. He eats them anyway. And he eats *mâte-faim*.

BIBOST

Mâte-faim?

DULAC

“Killers of hunger.” Black corn cakes cooked in ashes.

BIBOST

Why would anyone eat that?

DULAC

To make them dislike the idea of eating.

BIBOST

(Taking this in)
But does he expect other people to live like that?

DULAC

He demands only what God demands. But he doesn't demand it of us. He demands it of himself.

BIBOST

(FADEOUT. Lights up on VIANNEY, kneeling before the altar in prayer.
There is a long silence before he speaks.)

Oh God, grant me the conversion of my parish; I consent to suffer all you wish the whole of my life.

VIANNEY

(He bows his head. Slow FADEOUT. Lights come up on FIDDLER crossing the stage, fiddle under his arm. He is met by VIANNEY.)

You are on your way to play for the dance?

VIANNEY

Yes.

FIDDLER

How much are they paying you?

VIANNEY

Six francs.

FIDDLER

I will pay you twelve.

VIANNEY

Twelve?! To do what?

FIDDLER

To not play. To go back home. Here.

VIANNEY

(Fiddler takes the money with great amusement and exits. VIANNEY exits in the other direction.)

FADEOUT

Scene 4

Setting: Dance Hall.

At Rise: VILLAGERS and JEANNE-MARIE CHANEY are waiting around, not dancing, since there is no music.

Where's the damn fiddler!
3rd VILLAGER

He's not coming!
(Entering)
2nd VILLAGER

What!?
3rd VILLAGER

The priest paid him not to come!
2nd VILLAGER

Paid him not to come?!
5th VILLAGER

He can't do that!
4th VILLAGER

He might be able to do it once. But he can't keep doing it.
1st VILLAGER

In the meantime, let's dance!
7th VILLAGER

With no music?
6th VILLAGER

We can't dance without music!
CHANEY

Who needs music?
(With mock passion)
7th VILLAGER

We still have each other...

And plenty to drink!
8th VILLAGER

(They attempt to dance. It all seems forced, and it certainly isn't fun.
JEANNE-MARIE CHANEY breaks away.)

CHANEY

It's no use!

7th VILLAGER

Come on, Jeanne-Marie! We're not going to let that priest ruin our fun.

(She exits)

FADEOUT

Scene 5

Setting: Confessional screen.

At Rise: JEANNE-MARIE CHANEY is in front of the confessional screen, with Vianney.
Both are visible.

CHANEY

...and...for these and for all my sins, I...I ask forgiveness.

VIANNEY

May the blessing of Almighty God, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, be with you.

CHANEY

(Pauses)

But Father...

VIANNEY

Yes?

CHANEY

I think you did not give me absolution.

VIANNEY

Correct. I did not.

CHANEY

But...why didn't you?

VIANNEY

Because you have no intention to stop sinning. When you are ready to change your life, to seek heaven and God's will, and not your own selfish desires, come back and make a good confession, and you will find God ready to take you into his arms. But confession is not a magic formula that will keep you out of hell while you keep sinning.

(FADEOUT. Lights up on Interview. COUNTESS with DULAC.)

COUNTESS

There were only a few families here with any faith. They were drawn to him instantly. But they were also worried about him, thinking he would not survive without them. It would prove to be quite the other way. As for the unfaithful—and I try not to say that judgmentally—they were gradually drawn to him. They came to hear his fiery sermons. First out of curiosity. And also out of fear.

DULAC

They were drawn to him out of fear?

COUNTESS

He told them the truth about themselves. They started thinking about their souls. They were red-faced. They returned to their sin, but they no longer found themselves comfortable in it.

(Pauses)

And then...

DULAC

Then?

COUNTESS

Then it stopped.

DULAC

What stopped?

COUNTESS

The dancing stopped, the carousing stopped, the work on Sunday stopped. Sunday became a day of rest. There was in the village an extraordinary silence. But it was a happy silence. The Curé had replaced the love of fleeting pleasure with a love of something lasting and profound. He gave the people a taste for beautiful things instead of glamorous things. He made the Church beautiful, the liturgy beautiful. The Curé had taken away what the people thought they wanted and given them what they *really* wanted. They just didn't know it till he gave it to them. He converted the whole village.

(FADEOUT. Lights up on Confessional with CHANEY and VIANNEY behind screen.)

CHANEY

(Weeping)

...and those are my sins, Father. They are horrible, and I know it, and I am sorry for losing God and giving myself to such impurity.

VIANNEY

You have made a good confession, my child. We must be good trees, bearing good fruit. In the Gospel we see Christ condemning a tree that does not bear good fruit. You are not bearing good fruit because you do not take proper care of the tree. You have watered this tree with the foul water of your passions. From now on, water it with the tears of repentance, of sorrow, and of love, and you will cease to be a bad tree and will become one that will bear fruit, the fruit of eternal life. Look to St. Mary Magdalene, a great sinner, given to her passions. But she repented just as you have done. She watered Christ's feet with her tears. She is the great penitent. Look to her. Her tears became as pure as holy water because they were filled with the grace of God. Because she heard the words from Christ that you are now going to hear from me: "Go in peace, your sins are forgiven."

CHANEY

(Weeping)

Thank you, Father! Thank you!

(FADEOUT. Lights up on Interview. MAYOR with DULAC.)

MAYOR

When he first arrived, he was, let's face it, a troublemaker. He made a few friends, but he made even more enemies. He drew a few people into the church, but it seems he only told them about their sins and about hell. He opened a school that made everyone feel ignorant. He made people stop working on Sundays. And in this small village, which had so little money, he started closing businesses. *He* didn't close them. But they closed because of him. Two taverns. The dance hall. The cabaret. I listened to the wheels of local commerce begin to grind to a halt.

DULAC

You were obviously upset.

MAYOR

(Jovially)

No! But everybody else was. They all came to me to complain, expecting me to do something about it.

DULAC

And what *did* you do about it?

MAYOR

Have you ever noticed, Monsignor, that when business is good, everyone wants the government to stay away? They don't want commerce and politics to mix. But when business is bad, they expect the government to come and help them out. And have you ever noticed that people also don't want religion and politics to mix? They want religion kept out of politics. Unless of course religion gets out of hand. Then they expect politics to put religion back in its place.

DULAC

Yes, I've noticed.

MAYOR

The fact is, Ars was in a bad way, but not for economic reasons. For moral reasons. I saw right away that Fr. Vianney was going to stir things up, and he was not going to make my job easier. But he was actually doing my job for me. He was doing something I was never able to do as Mayor. He was cleaning up the town. When the town council came to me and told me I had to demand that the Bishop and the Church remove the Curé, I said something to them that I can't believe I said.

DULAC

What did you say?

MAYOR

I said, "They have sent us a saint."