

# **THE QUARREL IN ARLES**

By

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# **SYNOPSIS**

## **The Quarrel In Arles**

Historical Play:

By: E. Thomalen

Casting: 3 males 1 female

The Quarrel in Arles dramatizes the relationships between Vincent Van Gogh, his brother Theo Van Gogh, Paul Gauguin, and Johanna Bonger during the period between May 1, 1888 and December 24, 1888, a time of great personal turmoil but artistic achievement for Vincent Van Gogh and Paul Gauguin and the fulfillment of romantic desires for Theo Van Gogh and Johanna Bonger. Vincent's impulsive move to Arles, his decision to rent the Yellow House, conflict with Gauguin, final rupture with Gauguin and psychotic self-injury are part of the story. But it is also about love and its vicissitudes: the love of a man for the world and for art, a brother's love for a brother, a husband's love for his wife, a wife's love for her husband, a man's love for his friend, and a man's love for himself.

The play draws on source material from the letters of Vincent and Theo Van Gogh, letters of Paul Gauguin, autobiographical material from Gauguin and Johanna Bonger Van Gogh, and biographical material from a number of sources. However, this play is *fiction*, the original source material has been modified by this author for clarity or dramatic purposes and should not be trusted as always textually veridical. The structure of the play relies on the conceit of using letters to tell the story in the manner of A.R. Gurney's *Love Letters* and W. Gibson *American Primitive (John & Abigail)*. It also uses the narrative epilogue device as in Thornton Wilder's *Our Town*. A production should be accompanied by projections of the art referenced in the play on a screen above the stage.

## **CHARACTERS**

**Paul Gauguin - age 40, athletic build, graceful, intimidating, taller than Vincent, artistic attire**

**Vincent Van Gogh - age 35 but looks older, weathered skin, angular face, bristly beard, short reddish hair, clothes unkempt**

**Theo Van Gogh - age 31, dressed very conventionally for the time, smooth face, small mustache, dark hair, slender build**

**Johanna Bonger Van Gogh - age 25, small, neatly dressed, hair worn up over her head, clothing dark, good amateur pianist**

## **SETTING**

The stage has four separate scene areas. Upstage left, is Gauguin, his easel and a chair; Upstage right, is Johanna Bonger at a piano; Downstage left is Vincent Van Gogh at his easel with paintings and paints scattered about him on a table and floor, also a chair, and a bed; Downstage right is Theo Van Gogh at a French Empire table; and Downstage center is a small marble-top table with 2 chairs. Above the proscenium arch is a screen, in the shape of an easel, onto which paintings can be projected for the audience to follow some of the text, where indicated.

## ACT I

### Scene 1

*(The play opens with the light coming up on Johanna Bonger who plays softly several opening bars from Beethoven's "Moonlight Sonata" (Piano Sonata No. 14.) Then the light dims on her and fixes on Vincent Van Gogh standing at an easel, surrounded by rolled up canvases and art materials in a disorderly arrangement.)*

#### **VINCENT VG**

*(Reading aloud)*

May 1, 1888

My dear Theo

Thank you very much for your letter and the 50-franc note it contained. It's not in black that I see the future, but I see it bristling with many difficulties, and at times I wonder if these won't be stronger than I am...

Ah, well – today I rented the right-hand annex of this building, which contains 4 rooms, or more precisely a front room, with a galley behind it, and two small bedrooms upstairs.

Its painted yellow outside, whitewashed inside – situated in the full sunshine. I've rented it for 15 francs a month.

What I'd like to do would be to furnish the galley on the first floor, to be able to sleep there, since I usually eat meals in the cafe. The larger one, the studio and store, will remain here for the whole of the campaign in the south, and that way I have my independence from petty squabbles with guest-houses, which are ruinous and depress me...And, at this point I dare tell you, that I intend to invite Bernard, and other people, to send me canvasses to show them here, if the opportunity arises, and it will certainly arise in Marseille.

I hope I've been lucky this time – you understand, *yellow outside, white inside, right out in the sun*, at last I'll see my canvasses in a really bright interior. The floor is made of red bricks. And outside, a public garden...

If necessary, I could live at the new house with someone else, and I'd very much like to. Perhaps Gauguin will come to the south.

Ever yours,  
Vincent

*(Nods approvingly and turns to the audience)*

I am Vincent... the Dutch painter. I started down the path of art working for my Uncle,



an art dealer, and then I left to make my own art. My younger brother, Theo, now works for that company, he is based in Paris. It's called Goupil. I have told him he ought to become an artist also.

*(The light dims on Vincent and comes up on Theo. He is seated at a French Empire table. He rises to sit on the edge of the table.)*

### **THEO VG**

I am Theo Van Gogh, Vincent's younger brother. I am 31, my brother is 35. My brother and I are very close. We shared the same bedroom, even the same bed, in the attic, when we were growing up. That is, until my parents sent Vincent to Boarding School, at age 11. They said he would not listen to them. We played together all the time as children, explored the woods, played "jump the ditch". He taught me to shoot marbles and build sandcastles. In the winter we skated and sledged together and played indoor games by the fire. He told me stories and read books to me. I missed him.

We did not live together again until Paris. Two years ago Vincent decided to move to Paris, where I have been working. He hoped to paint and try to sell his paintings. We shared an apartment together. At first it was a disaster. As an art dealer I must

spend time with customers, and entertain them. They even, sometimes, stay with me when they come to Paris. But Vincent abandoned his paints and brushes everywhere, until the apartment looked like a paint workshop. He even wiped his brushes off on my socks. A guest once stepped into a pot of paint on the floor. My cook and housekeeper left after a month. I could not bring visitors home because Vincent would get into long, heated, arguments with them.

When he saw that it made me ill, he became more moderate at home. Later, when the firm appointed me to lead an initiative at Goupil to find new art, and new artists (because they could see there were profits to be made), I asked Vincent to help me find these artists. And he did! He introduced me to Lautrec, Gauguin, Pissarro, Seurat, Bernard, Signac and others. We spent much time together then.

But, suddenly, one day in February 1888, he decided to leave. We had become very attached to each other again when he stayed with me, did everything together, and now I am without him in the apartment, and it feels very empty. He meant so much to me. He went to Arles, wrote these lines:

*(Theo pulls a letter out of a sheaf of papers)*

“February 25, ...At times it seems to me that my blood is more or less ready to start circulating again, which wasn't the case lately in Paris, I really couldn't stand it any more.

I have to buy colors and canvasses from either a grocer or a bookseller, who don't have everything one might wish for. I'll definitely have to go to Marseille to see what the state of these things is like there. I had hoped to find some beautiful blues, etc. ...we'll see.

Don't worry, and give the pals a handshake for me.  
Yours truly  
Vincent”

My brother encouraged me to find an artist with whom to share the apartment. I did. But it's not the same.

*(The light dims on Theo VG and fixes on Gauguin who is standing beside an easel, reading a letter he has written. The art materials around him are neatly arranged)*

## **GAUGUIN**

*(Reading aloud)*  
June 15, 1888  
My dear Mette

I have not written for a long time but the summer heat, like last year, has debilitated me. The hot weather has brought on the fever again, which has affected my head. I am in such a feverish state that I shrink each day from the moment of writing, dreading to give you this news...

*(Sarcastically)*

which would no doubt cause you to forget my address.

You blame me for letting a long time go by without replying to you. Reply to what? Your letters are as they used to be in our life together, anything but an exchange of ideas and emotions. I am beginning to be tired of writing without knowing how my letters will be taken. It happened to please you to join me in the month of April last year, and, after we departed you wrote me a warm letter. I will never believe that that letter was selfish. When I tried to make good in Panama, your rare letters became icy, and somebody, who recently saw one, said:

*(Coldly.)*

“They can be shown about like business letters, without any indiscretion seeing how they close: ‘We beg to remain, yours faithfully, etc.’”

You ask me to give you courage. What do you need it for except for encouragement in material matters, Are you shut up within

the four walls of a tavern, are you deprived of a mother, of the sight of your children, of your chatter? What you mean is that if you had dividends coming in you would be the happiest of women. Nobody to thwart your wishes, overwhelmed with attentions, spoiled, even courted. Now and then I receive letters from people reputed to be intelligent, full of sympathy, of admiration for me. How different they are from yours.

I was 40 on the 7<sup>th</sup> of June and I have not yet received the tenth part of such birthday wishes from my family.

As you easily forget what you say and what you write, I send you a copy of your letter. See what it contains. Leaving out the news of the children, you can see how affectionate it is! Yet you demand affection from me and offer none in return.

Paul

*(Nods emphatically and turns to the audience)*

You see how it is, n'est pas? I am Gauguin... Paul Gauguin... a painter. I was a stockbroker and businessman, but gave that up to pursue art. My Danish wife and her family did not approve. I had to leave her, and the children in Copenhagen when I moved back to France. I am thinking of going to Martinique again.

*(The light dims on Gauguin and comes up on Johanna Bonger. She is seated, dreamily, at the piano.)*

### **JO BONGER**

I am Johanna Bonger, but friends call me Jo. I grew up in a large family in Amsterdam and was the 5<sup>th</sup> of 10 children. I was close to my brother Andries who was a year older and looked out for me.

We are a musical family, and frequently, for an evening, we performed musical quartets to entertain ourselves, and friends. I was the pianist. My older sister helped my Mother with family chores so that I was able to progress in school and learned English quite well, worked for a time in the library of the British Museum, then, later, translated English novels into Dutch and taught English in Dutch schools.

Andries left home and went to Paris and worked for an art dealer. There he met Theo Van Gogh, and wanted me to meet him.

*(The light fades on Johanna comes up again on Gauguin)*

### **GAUGUIN**

*(Gauguin reading a letter he has just written.)*

July 22, 1888

My dearest Vincent

I've just read your interesting letter and I entirely agree with you on the slight importance that accuracy contributes to art. Art is an abstraction; unfortunately we are becoming increasingly misunderstood. I would very much like it if we were to achieve our aims, that is, of my coming to Provence. I've always had an itch to interpret bullfights in my own way, as I understand them.

I'm beginning to recover the full use of my faculties: my illness had weakened me, and in my most recent studies I have, I think, gone beyond what I've been doing up to now. Of course, the collection of boors around me here, think I'm completely mad; and I'm happy about that, because it proves to me that I'm not.

*(Gauguin picks up the Breton painting and looks at it.)*

I've just finished a painting of a Breton wrestling match that I'm sure you'll like. Two kids, one in a pair of blue trunks, one in a pair of vermillion. The one at top right, coming up out of the water.

Until we're together, an affectionate handshake.

Paul Gauguin

*(Puts the letter away)*

I have gotten several letters from Vincent to join him, but I don't know how well we can get along.

*(The light dims on Gauguin and comes back up on Vincent.)*

### VINCENT VG

*(Reading aloud)*

Late August 1888

My Dear Theo

I write in great haste, to tell you that I have had a note from Gauguin to say that he has not written much, but that he is quite ready to come south as soon as the opportunity occurs.

They are enjoying themselves very much painting, arguing, and fighting with the worthy English. He speaks well of Bernard's work and Bernard of his.

I am hard at it, painting with enthusiasm, like a man from Marseille eating bouillabaisse, which won't surprise you when you know that what I'm at is painting of some great *sunflowers*.

I have three canvases in hand – 1<sup>st</sup> is three huge flowers in a green vase, with a light background; the 2<sup>nd</sup> three flowers, one



gone to seed, stripped of its petals, and another in bud against a royal blue background; the 3<sup>rd</sup> and largest, twelve flowers and buds in a yellow vase. The last is, therefore, light on light, and I hope it will be the best. I probably shall not stop at that.

Now that I hope to live with Gauguin in a studio of our own, I want to make a decoration for the studio, nothing but big sunflowers. Next door to your shop, in that restaurant, there is a lovely decoration of flowers. I always remember that big sunflower in the window. If I carry out this idea there will be a dozen panels. So the whole thing will be a symphony in blue and yellow. I am working at it every morning from sunrise, because the flowers fade so soon. The thing is to do the whole painting in one go.

A good handshake, I must get back to work.

Yours Vincent

*(The light now dims on Vincent VG and comes back up again on Jo Bonger.)*

### **JO BONGER**

I met Theo, briefly, for the first time in the summer of 1885, in Amsterdam. He was a friend of my brother's. His sister and I became friends and she said nice things

about Theo. He visited me, briefly, in August the following year. He was disappointed that his Uncle would not support him to open his own art gallery...or something. I thought nothing more of it. He never asked to correspond with me, and we did not write letters. When he was here it was enjoyable to talk with him about the arts. I knew his brother was a painter.

Then in May, of the next year, Theo came to call on me again. We were talking pleasantly, in the parlor, about theater, literature, and art; when he suddenly burst out:

**THEO VG**

Johanna, I love you and want to marry you!

**JO BONGER**

But aside from his two brief visits, we didn't know each other at all! I was numb. He said he wanted to marry me, that we could have a rich life, full of art and intellectual discussions and friends who wanted to work for good causes and to make the world a better place. But I did not know him. Between visits, spaced a year apart, we had no correspondence, nothing to suggest that he was having such ideas about a life together.

I said "No". What else could I say? I could see he was very disappointed, and I felt sorry that I was responsible for that, but I had no choice. He wrote to me shortly

afterwards, saying that I was naïve, and even adolescent, in my ideas of love, that such love was a dream and would end in a rude awakening. Lasting love, he said, involved faith, and forgiveness, and learning to love one's partner. Well, I did not answer *that* letter, and was determined not to have anything more to do with him. That was in the Spring of 1887.

*(She plays a few more bars of the "moonlight sonata" and then the light dims on her and comes up on Vincent VG.)*

### VINCENT VG

September 9, 1888

My dear Theo

I have just mailed the sketch of the new picture, the *Night Café*...I have tried to express the idea that the café is a place where one can ruin oneself, go mad, or commit a crime. So I have tried to express, as it were, the powers of darkness in a low public house, by soft Louis XV green and malachite, contrasting with yellow-green and harsh blue-greens, and all this in an atmosphere like a devil's furnace, of pale sulfur...

I see absolutely nothing to object to in your suggestion of exhibiting once at the *Revue Independente*, provided, however, that I am no obstacle to the others who usually exhibit there...(Only) the *Sower* and the

*Night Café* are attempts at finished pictures.

With a handshake  
Ever yours, Vincent

*(The light dims on Vincent VG and comes up on Gauguin.)*

### **GAUGUIN**

Vincent asked to exchange paintings, I wrote to a colleague about it:

*(Gauguin searches for a letter)*

“October 1888

I painted a portrait of myself for Vincent who had asked me for one. I think it's one of my best things: thoroughly incomprehensible – so abstract. A bandit's head at first glance, a Jean Valjean, also personifying an avant-garde painter who is frowned upon and in the eyes of the world, a convict in chains... The eyes, the mouth, and the nose are like flowers in a Persian rug, also personifying the Symbolist idea. The colors are colors remote from nature; just picture a vague memory of pottery twisted by a fierce fire! All the reds, the purples, streaked by flashes of fire, like a furnace blazing before the painter's eyes, where the struggle among his thoughts takes place. All this on a chrome yellow

background strewn with childish nosegays. The bedroom of a pure young girl. An artist so pure, not yet sullied by the putrid kiss of the Beaux Arts.

Theo Van Gogh has just bought 300 Francs worth of pottery from me. So at the end of the month I leave for Arles where I think I'll stay a long time, since the purpose of my stay there is to make it easier for me to work without worrying about money until Theo has managed to launch me. Theo wouldn't go to the expense of supporting me in the Midi just for my good looks. Being a cold Dutchman he has appraised the lay of the land and intends to push things as far as they can go..."

*(The light fades on Gauguin and comes up on Vincent VG)*

## **VINCENT VG**

October 3, 1888

My Dear Gauguin

This morning I received your *excellent* letter, which I've immediately sent to my brother; your conception of the modern artist in general, of which your portrait is a symbol, is striking. I couldn't be more intrigued to see it – but it will seem to me, I'm already sure, that this work is too important for me to wish to have as an exchange. But if you wish to keep it for us,

my brother will buy it from you, as I immediately asked him to do.

I must tell you that even while working I never cease to think about this enterprise of setting up a studio with yourself, and me, as permanent residents, but which we'd both wish to make into a shelter and a refuge for our pals at moments when they find themselves at an impasse in their struggle. When you left Paris, my brother and I spent more time together, that time will always be unforgettable for me. Our discussions took on a broader scope — with Guillaumin, with Pissarro, father and son, with Seurat. In these discussions, it was often a matter of the thing that's so dear to our hearts, both my brother's and mine, the steps to be taken in order to preserve the financial existence of painters, and to preserve the means of production (colors, canvases), and to preserve directly to them their share in the price which their paintings presently fetch, only after they have long ceased to be the property of the artist that creates them.

I believe that, if from now on, you began to think of yourself as the head of this studio, which we'll attempt to make a refuge for several people, little by little, bit by bit, as our unremitting work provides us with the means to bring the thing to completion — I believe that then you'll feel relatively

consoled for your present misfortunes of penury and illness, considering that we're probably giving our lives for a generation of painters that will survive many years to come.

About the room where you'll stay, I've made a decoration especially for it, the garden of a poet...a dream landscape in which one may readily picture to oneself Botticelli, Giotto, Petrarch, Dante and Boccaccio. In the decoration I've tried to tease out the essence of what constitutes the changeless character of the region. And I'd have wished to paint this garden in such a way that one would think both of the old poets of this place and of its new poet — Paul Gauguin. However clumsy this effort, you'll still see, perhaps, that while preparing your studio I've thought of you with very deep feeling.

Let's be of good heart for the success of our enterprise, and may you continue to feel very much at home here because I'm so strongly inclined to believe that all this will last for a long time.

Good handshake, and believe me.

Ever yours,  
Vincent

*(The light on Vincent VG fades and comes up on Theo VG)*

### **THEO VG**

That is the letter Vincent wrote to Gauguin, but to me he expressed different things, which of course raised questions in my mind about how they *would* get along.

*(Reading)*

October 5, 1888

My dear Theo

Now I have just received Gauguin's portrait done of himself...The Gauguin is immediately remarkable...studied...it certainly has above all the effect of representing: a prisoner. Not a hint of cheerfulness. It's not flesh in the very least, but we can boldly put that down to his intention to make something melancholy; the flesh in the shadows is lugubriously tinged with blue. And now, at last, I have a chance to compare my painting with that of the pals.

The portrait I'm sending to Gauguin in exchange stands up beside it, I'm sure...I had conceived *my* portrait as being that of...a simple worshipper of the eternal Buddha.

And when I put Gauguin's conception, and mine, side by side, my portrait is equally serious but less desperate. What Gauguin's portrait says to me, first and



foremost, is that he ought not go on that way...(he) looks ill and tormented in his portrait.

*(The light dims on Theo VG and rises on Jo Bonger playing a few more bars from the "Moonlight Sonata")*

### **JO BONGER**

I wonder if I made the right decision about Theo's proposal. My brother, and his sister, have urged me to think it over.

I have had no further contact with him after his letter. There has been no further correspondence. I don't know. If I should wish to explore his proposal any further, I would need to write to him. But how can I do that after my firm rejection of his proposal. I don't know.

*(She plays a few more bars of the "Moonlight Sonata". The light dims on Jo Bonger and comes up on Vincent VG again)*

### **VINCENT VG**

October 16, 1888

My dear Theo

At last I am sending you a little sketch to give you at least an idea of the direction the work is taking...

This time it is simply my *bedroom*, but the color has to do the job here, to be suggestive here of rest, or sleep in general. In short, looking at the painting should rest the mind, or rather, the imagination.

The walls are of a pale violet. The floor is of red tiles. The bedstead and the chairs are fresh butter yellow. The sheet and the pillows very bright lemon green. The bedspread scarlet red. The windows green. The dressing table orange, the basin blue. The doors lilac. And that's all, nothing in this bedroom, with its shutters closed.

The solidity of the furniture should, also, now express unshakeable repose. There are portraits on the wall and a mirror. The hand-towel – as there is no white in the painting – will be white... I'll work on it again all day tomorrow, but you can see how simple the idea is. The shadows, and cast shadows, are removed, its colored in flat, plain tints, like Japanese prints. It will contrast with the ...night café.

I shake your hand firmly.  
Ever yours Vincent”

I did not mention to Theo that I was having trouble sleeping again because of all the ideas that keep flying through my brain when I close my eyes: about Gauguin, the

studio, the colleagues who might come, the art it could produce, and the money it might bring. With that money, perhaps, I could find a woman who would have me for a husband and give me a son. But so many times in the past I have had such great hopes: in the Hague, London, Paris, Amsterdam, Brussels, even the Borinage and it has all ended in failure. I hope Arles will be different, but will it? That worry drives the slumber from my eyes.

*(The light dims on Vincent VG and rises again on Gauguin)*

### **GAUGUIN**

I went to Arles to join Vincent after he pressed me to come. He said he wanted to found the Atelier du Midi, and I would be its leader.

This poor Dutchman was all ardor and enthusiasm, the Midi to be expressed in bursts of flame. And on his canvas the chrome yellows did burst out; their sunlight flooded the low farmhouses and the entire plain. In my yellow room, sunflowers with purple eyes stood out against a yellow background; the ends of their stalks bathed in a yellow pot, on a yellow table. In one corner of the painting the painter's signature: "Vincent". And the yellow sun, coming through the yellow curtains of my room, floods all this flowering with gold...

Oh yes! He loved yellow, did good Vincent, the painter from Holland, gleams of sunlight warming his soul, which detested fog. A craving for warmth.

When the two of us were together in Arles, both of us insane, and constantly at war over beautiful colors, I adore red; where could I find a perfect vermillion?

He, taking his yellowest brush one day, painted on the wall, suddenly purple:

“I am saner than most  
I am the Holy Ghost.”

*(Laughs)*

In my yellow room was a small still life: a purple one and two enormous, worn-out, shapeless shoes. The ones he wore one fine morning, when they were new, to go on foot from Holland to Belgium ... Contrary to what his teachers, wise Dutchman, had told him, Vincent had believed in a Jesus who loved the poor; and his soul, brimming with charity, desired to bring both consoling words and sacrifice, desired to combat the strong for the sake of the weak. Beyond the shadow of a doubt, Vincent was already a madman! So I wrote later.

Yes he decorated every wall with his paintings, he framed dozens of his own canvases in oak and walnut and placed

them everywhere in the house, especially in the small bedrooms. In the galley he hung a great gallery of his portraits and prints and figure studies. He left little room to put up my work. I could see this small building, this school, was to be him and yet I was to be its leader according to what he had written me. But his work did not reflect what Bernard and I were doing at all. How to tell him this?

*(The light dims on Gauguin and comes up on Theo VG.)*

### **THEO VG**

Vincent sent me a telegram when Gauguin arrived, a moment for which he had been most eager. He then sent me a letter 2 days later.

*(Reading)*

October 25, 1888

My dear Theo

Thank you for your letter and for the 50 francs note. As you learned from my telegram, Gauguin arrived in good health. He even gave me the impression of being in better shape than me.

He is naturally very pleased with the sale of his paintings that you made, and I no less, since that way certain other expenses, absolutely necessary for moving in, needn't wait or fall on your shoulders alone.

...He is certainly interesting as a man, and I have every confidence that with him we'll do a great many things. He'll probably produce a great deal here, and perhaps I shall too.

I myself feel, to the point of being mentally crushed and physically drained, the need to produce paintings, precisely because, in short, I have no other means, none, none! of ever recouping our outlay. I can do nothing about it if my canvases don't sell...I believe that the day will come when I'll sell too, but I'm so far behind with you, and, while I spend, I bring nothing in. That feeling sometimes makes me sad.

More soon, and I shake your hand firmly.  
Ever yours,  
Vincent

I, of course, reassured him that the money was of no importance to me and that what was important was that he take care of himself and continue his work. I have tried to sell his paintings because I knew it was important for him to have someone else admire his talent and willing to exchange something for it. It would give him confidence that what he was doing had value; that he was on the right track.

One collector in Paris, who expressed an interest, did not choose to buy anything. A painting sent to Goupil's in The Hague was returned unsold. A self-portrait sent to London disappeared. Three paintings that were exhibited in the Salons des Independents were nearly discarded when the exhibition closed, while I was out of town and could not retrieve them. Even Vincent's friends were often unwilling to exchange paintings with him.

These things made me sad. None of this has gotten better since he moved to Arles. On the other hand I have found buyers for five of Gauguin's painting and some of his pottery, almost 1500 francs in total, now. Even an established artist, Degas, had praise for Gauguin's work, but so far there has been no such praise for Vincent's. He also has had a bad history of burning his bridges with people, in the past at Goupil's, who might have helped him.

*(The light dims on Theo VG and comes up on Vincent VG)*

### **VINCENT VG**

November 10, 1888

My dear Theo

I've received a letter from Mr. E. Dujardin regarding the exhibition of some canvases of mine in his dark hole. I find it so disgusting to pay for the planned exhibition

with a canvas. There's one answer to give to this gentleman's letter, and you will find it enclosed. Only I'm sending it to you, and not to him, so that you know my thoughts, and so that you can simply tell him that I've changed my mind, and haven't the slightest desire to exhibit at this moment. It is no use at all getting angry with the chap, it's better to be tritely polite. So, NO exhibition at the *Revue Independent*.

*(Plaintively)*

We have hardly ever exhibited have we?

*(Defiantly!)*

Now I declare, here, that I absolutely do not know what useful purpose exhibiting even serves, and, it would seem to me, more just certainly that you should keep the studies that you liked in your apartment, that you send the others back to me here, rolled up since your apartment is small, and if you kept everything they would clutter it up.

But, as for the *Revue Independent*, I'd ask you to put a complete end to it, they're completely mistaken if they imagine I'm going to pay to have myself put in a show in such a small, dark, and above all, scheming, hole...

More soon, I shake your hand firmly and send my regards to the Dutchmen staying with you.



Ever yours  
Vincent

PS Gauguin sends his warm regards. My work is just not selling, and to pay a fee to exhibit it, with little hope of a sale, cannot be justified. I am glad that Gauguin has been able to sell his work.

*(Gauguin moves downstage left to where Vincent is with a painting in his hand. The light comes up on both.)*

**GAUGUIN**

Vincent, you are a good artist, but you paint too *quickly* and you apply too much paint to the canvas. If you slowed down you would not need to do that. You seem to jab very rapidly, and very forcefully, at the canvas and then, if you don't like it, you paint over it. But, if you took more time, you could decide just what was right, and apply the paint once.

**VINCENT VG**

I cannot help it, something just impels me to stab at the painting, and I do it. It is almost like it is not me that is doing it. Have you ever read Maupassant's *Le Horla*?

**GAUGUIN**

His horror story about a spirit causing things to happen that get attributed to the author? Yes I have read it.

**VINCENT VG**

Sometimes I do things that I don't remember, or that I don't mean to do, but, nevertheless, I do them. I know that because people say I have done them, or my hand has done them, without my being aware of it. Like when I may put the wrong color someplace on the painting, but don't intend to do that.

**GAUGUIN**

Yes, in the story the man burns down his own house trying to destroy the Horla.

**VINCENT VG**

Yes and he finally realizes that the only way he can get rid of the guilty culprit is to destroy himself. It is a terrible nightmare I have sometimes.

**GAUGUIN**

No more of that. You, also, only paint what you see, you love to paint in the open air, but your canvases have no meaning beyond what you see there. Now, that is what most painters do, especially the *Impressionists* and the *Pointillists*.

But if you want to paint in the new style, you must paint from memory, give yourself a chance to think about what you have seen, to imagine what you want to create.

You could do some sketches first. But your rendering would include something more, something mysterious, something that raises a question, something symbolic, that points beyond just the simple impression.

It is what Bernard and I, and those of us who were working in Brittany, the Pont Aven group, were doing. Our school of painting is beginning to find collectors in the public, and is selling to buyers. It is what people will look for in the future.

You have painted *Le Café de Nuit* in, shall we say, the Van Gogh style. I have painted *Le Café de Nuit* in the new *symbolist* style. You and I have gone to that café many times together for dinner, or an absinthe, at the end of the day. You spent the night in the café, painted what you saw that evening. It is a very fine painting, but what does it mean? It is just a night at a seedy café with patrons one cannot really see, the night manager, and the almost empty interior of the place.

But here is my painting of the same café. You can see the face of Madame Ginoux. She is smiling. But why? What is she thinking about? Is it the others in the café? We are *not*, somehow, above the scene, but actually in it, at eye level with Madame Ginoux,, and the other patrons.

I painted mine in the Yellow House and not in the café'. And for the patrons of the cafe I have included your images of the Zouave and the Postman. I have even included a pussy, for what purpose? What is it saying?

**VINCENT VG**

I certainly can see what you mean, it is a very clever piece. The same café, yet a different view of it from mine. I can see that. I would like to do it too. It is very hard to change my style, I shall try to paint from memory like you.

*(Gauguin turns and walks back to his easel, the light comes up on Vincent VG.)*

**VINCENT VG**

November 19, 1888

My dear Theo

This is a long letter but here is the important part.

...Gauguin in spite of himself and in spite of me, has proved to me a little that it was time for me to vary things a bit – I'm beginning to compose from memory, and all my studies will still be useful to me for that work, as they remind me of former things I've seen. So what does selling any of it matter if we're not absolutely pressed for money?

...As for Goupil's knowing them, alas, a little too well, I think that I won't approach them. Not that I'd ever try to ruin anything, on the contrary, you must admit that I urge all the other painters I know, zealously, to exhibit there. But as for me... I have an old grudge against them...

I can't say anything more yet. I rather regret having a room full of canvases but having nothing to send when Gauguin sends his.

..I really hope that we'll always remain friends with Gauguin, and in business with him...

One more handshake, and thanks for everything you are doing for me.

Ever yours  
Vincent.

*(The light fades on Vincent V G and comes up on Jo Bongger)*

### **JO BONGER**

I cannot say that Theo's proposal did not leave an impression on me. I continued my work as a teacher and translator, but I began to think about having a family before I got too old, and this Fall I wrote to Theo that I would like to see him again. I had

changed my mind, if he still loved me, maybe we could consider a life together.

He wrote back, very enthusiastically, that he did still love me. I came to Paris in December, and stayed with my brother, and we took our time, got to know each other, and talked things over, just the two of us. We made marriage plans. We decided to announce our decision December 21 and sent out the announcements of the engagement party in Amsterdam, set for January 9 of the New Year.

Theo's Mother was very happy, and thanked the good Lord for answering her prayer. My friend, Theo's sister, was also very pleased. Theo was a little worried about how Vincent would take it, because they have always been so close, and he has been critical of other women whom Theo had cared for in the past. That was a reason we kept it secret until we announced it. We sent him an invitation and Theo will see that he has enough money to attend a reception for our engagement.

*(She plays an ascending portion of the "Moonlight Sonata". The light dims on Jo Bonger and comes up on Gauguin)*

## **GAUGUIN**

But as we pressed on into December, and the weather forced us to spend more time together, I found myself becoming increasingly dissatisfied with our situation, and with Vincent as my only companion. What was there for me in Arles?

My artist friends, and admirers, were in Paris; where one could go to the theater, opera, ballet, or make visits to the demimonde. And there was the Louvre and exhibitions.

I wrote to my friend and colleague Emile Bernard in December:

“I am like a fish out of water in Arles; everything – landscape and people alike – seem so small, shabby. Vincent and I don’t agree on much, and especially not on painting. He admires Daumier, Daubigny, Ziem, and the great Theodore Rousseau – all of whom I can’t stand. And on the other hand, he detests Ingre, Raphael, Degas – all of whom I admire. I answer “Corporal, you are right’ just to have some peace and quiet.

He likes my paintings very much, but while I am painting he always feels that this is wrong, and that is wrong. He is a romantic, whereas I, I am more inclined to a primitive style...”

That is how it was with us as the year was reaching its close. I also wrote to Theo asking him to send me part of the money for paintings that were sold. I told him that Vincent and I could not live side by side, without trouble, due to our different temperaments. I wish to return to Paris. I greatly esteem Vincent, but we are just incompatible.

*(The light dims on Gauguin and comes up on Vincent VG)*

### VINCENT VG

I also wrote Theo  
December 11, 1888  
My dear Theo

Thank you very much for your letter, for the 100-franc note enclosed, and the 50-franc money order.

I myself think that Gauguin had become a little disheartened by the good town of Arles, by the little yellow house where we work, and above all by me. Indeed, there are bound to be grave difficulties still to overcome here, for him, as well as for me.

But these difficulties are rather within our selves than elsewhere. All in all, I think, personally, that he will either definitely go, or he will definitely stay. I told him to consider his costs before deciding to leave.



Gauguin is very strong, very creative, but precisely because of that he must have peace. Will he find it elsewhere if he doesn't find it here? I am waiting with absolute serenity for him to make a decision.

Good handshake.  
Vincent.

*(The light dims on Vincent VG and comes up on Theo VG)*

### **THEO VG**

I got those letters from Vincent, and Gauguin. I felt very sad for Vincent because I knew how much it meant for him to have the association with Gauguin, and to create an artists colony in Arles. All of his relationships with people ended this way, especially with people that he felt close to for a time.

Vincent seems content to stay in Arles, even if Gauguin leaves, which is a relief to me, because Jo and I are planning our engagement, and to have Vincent in the apartment again, while we were planning our life together, would be very difficult. He has such strong opinions about things. I would be afraid that he would cause Jo to break off the engagement and decide to remain in Holland. She has not met Vincent yet, and I am relieved about that,

she only knows that he is a painter, and now lives in Provence. I am not sure what her brother has told her about him.

Then I was very relieved when I got a second letter from Gauguin, in which he wrote: "Please consider my journey to Paris imaginary and in consequence, the letter I wrote to you as a bad dream."

I was much relieved, and hopeful that at least he would stay with Vincent until the springtime. I heard, later, that Gauguin had written to a friend: "I owe a great deal to Theo and Vincent, and although there is a certain amount of discord, I can't hold a grudge against an excellent heart that is ill, suffering, and needs me."

*(The light dims on Theo VG and comes up on Gauguin.)*

## **GAUGUIN**

Things were better for awhile, but my feelings had not changed about Arles or working side by side with Vincent. He was constantly interrupting me to engage in a rant about something. Increasingly he was having trouble sleeping, and would get up in the middle of the night. I would wake up to find him standing over my bed, and I would say to him: "What is the matter with you, Vincent?" He did not answer, but would go back to bed.

I did not know if he was planning to kill me, or wanted to get into bed with me. I decided to do a still life of him painting sunflowers, which he seemed to like at the time. But his behavior with me became more erratic, and he became quite noisy around the little house. At times he would utter something, and I wondered who he was speaking to. When I asked him, he dismissed it. So it was.

I asked him to join me at the café, to have something to drink two nights before Christmas Eve. He ordered an absinthe and I did the same.

*(Gauguin comes downstage to the front and Vincent joins him there and they sit at a small table sipping their drinks.)*

**GAUGUIN**

Vincent, what is the matter with you?

**VINCENT VG**

There is nothing the matter with me.  
*(Pause)*

But I have to ask you: are you and my brother conspiring to sell your art and not to sell mine? It seems that way. He has sold over a thousand francs of your work and nothing of mine.

**GAUGUIN**

Vincent your brother would never do that,  
and I have no reason to do it.

**VINCENT VG**

How do you explain it then?

**GAUGUIN**

It is just how things have worked out. Most  
of what has been sold is my work from  
Pont-Aven. Your art will sell eventually too.

**VINCENT VG**

I have not had a letter from Theo since late  
October and it is almost Christmas. He  
does not answer my letters, and he seems  
to be involved with showing your work.

**GAUGUIN**

He doesn't just sell my work, he sells many  
artists at Goupil's and he has to meet with  
many different buyers. Vincent, you put too  
much weight on this.

**VINCENT VG**

And why have I not heard from Bernard or  
the other colleagues? I know you have  
corresponded with some of them, and they  
have written you back, but not written me.  
Have you said things about me that have  
made them withdraw from me?

**GAUGUIN**

Certainly not!

**VINCENT VG**

Are you planning to leave the Yellow House?

**GAUGUIN**

Perhaps... sometime... but not now. I was considering it before, but changed my mind. What do you think of my portrait of you?

**VINCENT VG**

Your painting mocks me!

**GAUGUIN**

Why do you say it mocks you?

**VINCENT VG**

You make me look insane.

**GAUGUIN**

You love to paint sunflowers, so I put that in your portrait. I only painted what I see.

**VINCENT VG**

The symbolism ...an insane man obsessed with sunflowers!

**GAUGUIN**

If that is the way you see it. I won't argue with you corporal.

**VINCENT VG**

And you mock me in your painting of “The Night Café”. You are very clever, always undermining me.

**GAUGUIN**

How did I undermine you there?

**VINCENT VG**

You put the Postman and the Zouave in the painting. These are my friends and models but you have painted the Postman sitting with 3 prostitutes and the Zouave with a man who has passed out from drink. I have painted the Postman and his entire family, but you choose to mock him, and mock me. What will he think when he sees this picture? Madame Ginoux, she gets the joke, and laughs at me.

**GAUGUIN**

Vincent, I can assure you, that was not my intent.

*(The conversation pauses, then Vincent throws the contents of his absinthe at Gauguin who moves sideways and avoids it.)*

Come on Vincent it is time to go home and go to sleep.

*(He wraps up the smaller Vincent VG and takes him outside the café and brings him to his bed. Vincent lies down. Then speaking to the audience.)*

### **GAUGUIN**

But I am concerned about Vincent's irrational behavior and, now, his throwing a glass at me. He is not rational and one does not know what else is in his mind.

*(The light goes down and then comes up again signaling the next day.)*

The next day leaving Arles was on my mind again, because it was not just disagreements about art, but my safety, itself, seemed to me to be at risk.

*(Vincent VG performs his morning ablutions and calls over to Gauguin.)*

### **VINCENT VG**

My dear Gauguin, I have a dim recollection that I offended you last night. I am terribly sorry if I did.

### **GAUGUIN**

I forgive you Vincent, with all my heart. You are dear to me also. But yesterday's scene might recur, and, if I were struck, I might lose control of myself and strangle you. I

shall write to your brother and tell him I am coming back to Paris.

*(The light dims on Vincent but stays on Gauguin)*

### **GAUGUIN**

I had heard, in Paris, from artist friends, how Vincent's provocations at the café Le Tambourin had resulted in his being beaten up when he would not stop. I did not want to repeat that. I, also, am not the keeper of Theo's brother, he is.

Vincent told me when his parents sent him to boarding school, at age 15 he walked 20 miles home to get away from that place. No effort of will was too great for him, no matter how unsound.

That Sunday, December 23<sup>rd</sup>, was a very unpleasant day, we hardly spoke to each other at all and spent little time around each other. He had received an invitation to a reception for his brother Theo's engagement, he seemed troubled by it. He left it on the table, but did not speak to me about it.

When evening finally came around, we ate by ourselves and I decided to go out for a stroll. I was on the other side of the park when I heard familiar footsteps behind me.



I recognized them as Vincent's. I turned around and saw him charging at me with an open razor in his hand. He said: "Are you going to leave?" I said: "Yes".

I thought later: 'Should I have tried to disarm him?' I have often wondered that since. When he heard my answer, he ran off in the direction of the house. I decided not to go back to the Yellow House that night, not knowing what Vincent might do if I were to sleep there, so I took a room at the hotel.

*(The light dims on Gauguin and comes up on Vincent in his bed)*

### **VINCENT VG**

I went back to the Yellow House, got into bed, but could not sleep, my mind would not rest, the voices would not stop. I could not decide which was worse: Gauguin deserting me, or Theo! Gauguin's betrayal and defection poisons my hopes for an artist's colony here, and means I shall remain hopelessly in debt and alone once again. But Theo's engagement brings back bitter memories, and dangers to our partnership. When Theo asked Johanna to marry him, and she said "no", I was secretly pleased. Not only because it meant that our partnership would remain, but also because he suffered what I had

suffered when my cousin, whom I asked to marry me, had said to me: “No! Never!”.

I tried desperately to persuade her to change her mind, but her Father, my Uncle, and my family, would not support me then. After a bitter argument with my Father, he demanded that I leave his home, and the family. I believe Theo agreed with my Father.

After that rejection, and humiliation, I abandoned my religion, my family, everything about my past bourgeois life, and committed myself to art, and poverty if necessary.

I cannot count on tenderness from a woman unless I have money, which I do not have prospects of earning. But Theo can provide a nice home, and life, for a woman, and her children. And as for our partnership: When I need something, and she does, she will say to Theo: “But I am your wife”. Where does that leave me?

Without Theo I cannot imagine how I can carry on. I am finished, I cannot sell my work, or support myself, I am a failure again, failure at everything I do. Sooner or later everyone leaves me. All my past sins, and faults, well up. I am punished for disobeying Father, his disappointment in me brought on his death. I have an image

of myself as a young man, crazy with myself, angry with my Father. Once, someone, that was not-me, grabbed the knife, with *my* hand, at the dinner table, to kill my Father. Members of the family stopped that man who was holding the knife.

All these confusing thoughts bring back my Father's preaching: "if thy right eye offend thee, pluck it out, and cast it from thee; for it is profitable for thee that one of thy members should perish, and not that thy whole body should be cast into hell; and if thy right hand offend thee, cut it off." To cut off my hand would be to kill myself for I could no longer paint.

*(Stage to black)*

I got up, and in order to stop the demonic voices telling me to kill myself, I cut off my ear with my shaving razor. Blood was everywhere. I lay down to die, but I was *still* not able to stop the voices. I got up, bandaged the place where the ear was cut off, and took the flesh of the ear and tried to find a woman who had been kind to me, and who worked in one of the brothels. I finally left it with someone to give it to her and asked that she should keep it in remembrance of me. Was I not like Jesus, willing to suffer and be reviled, like him? I wanted to sacrifice myself, to redeem myself and the whole world. I then went

back to the Yellow House, and to my bed,  
pulled the covers over me, and finally fell  
into a midnight sorrowing blackness.

*(The light comes up on Jo Bonger playing  
again bars from a descending section of  
the "Moonlight Sonata")*

### **JO BONGER**

Years later when I was going through  
Vincent's correspondence to my husband  
Theo, I came across a poem of  
Longfellow's that Vincent had copied and  
sent to Theo many years before these  
events. But perhaps it captures his feeling  
of that December in 1888:

The day is ending,  
The night descending  
The marsh is frozen,  
The river dead.  
Through clouds like ashes  
The red sun flashes  
On village windows  
That glimmer red.  
And through the meadows  
Like fearful shadows  
Slowly passes  
A funeral train.

*(The light dims on Jo Bonger and comes  
up on Theo VG)*

### **THEO VG**

I was about to leave Paris for Holland on Christmas Eve, so that Johanna and I could celebrate our future together with our families, when I received a telegram from Gauguin. It was very cryptic: “Vincent has fallen gravely ill”.

That evening I said goodbye to Johanna at the train station and boarded the coach for Arles. When I arrived, I met Gauguin, and he told me what had happened. I asked him if he wanted to visit Vincent with me, but he thought it best not to, considering how they parted the day before. It might only stir up Vincent’s wrath.

I left him and went to the hospital: the Hotel Dieu. Vincent’s wound had been cleaned and dressed. I found him lying down in a bed on the ward and I lay down beside him. We talked of times from our childhood. He seemed comforted by that for a while, but then he would start to brood on philosophy or theology. Grief would well up inside, he would try to cry, but could not. It was very sad to see.

I left that evening to take the train back to Paris with Gauguin. Gauguin had packed his own paintings and possessions and took them along. There was no going back. Vincent remained in the hospital for almost a fortnight. But he was re-hospitalized a few weeks later, in early February. He

remained there then until his transfer to the Asylum of St.-Paul-de-Mausole in St. Remy in May. People harassed and mocked him in Arles.

He painted some beautiful canvases in St. Remy. But the orchards, the fields of brilliant sunshine and the sunflowers of Arles were replaced with the dark, flaming cypresses and the swirling starry nights of St. Remy. In January 1890 he received a favorable review by an unknown art critic at the *Mercure de France* who spoke of Vincent as painting: “flaming, burning atmospheres that seem to be exhaled from fantastic furnaces where gold and diamonds and similar gems are turned to incandescent vapors” and “Trees twisted like giants in battle defying airy sorcerers...cypresses that expose their nightmarish, flame-like black silhouettes...white and pink and golden orchards, like the idealizing dreams of virgins...” and “in the vehement passion of his drawing and color...a powerful figure is revealed...sower of truth, who would regenerate the decrepitude of our art and perhaps our imbecile and industrial society”.

Suddenly people became interested in Vincent's work. In March, a painting sold for 400 francs, a significant sum. He, still in the hospital, plunged into another mad

delirium until May, when it cleared and he demanded to leave. He finally agreed with me that he should remain under the care of a physician.

Dr. Gachet came highly recommended by artists, and others we knew. Vincent came to our home in Paris for 3 days on his way to Auvers, he met Jo and our son, his godson.

But his life in Auvers was difficult, the scar where the ear had been, and his clothes, made him look strange. He managed to offend people, including Dr. Gachet. We visited Vincent once in Auvers and in July he came to Paris when I considered quitting Goupils. Goupils would not increase my wages despite the work I had done for them. Unfortunately, that was not a good visit. Things were said that should not have been said. Jo was distressed by our infant son who was ill. I worried about our finances. We were living on the 4<sup>th</sup> floor of the building and it was difficult to get out with the baby. I accompanied Jo to Holland for her to spend a few weeks there, with family to help with the baby. I returned home worried about how I would be able to pay all my debts.

Then, unexpectedly, I got a message at work from Dr. Gachet that I should come to Auvers because Vincent had wounded

himself and there could be complications. Vincent lasted 2 days and then died... shortly after midnight... in my arms. It was only 2 months after he left the St. Remy asylum. I miss him.

*(The light dims on Theo V G and comes up on Jo Bonger)*

### **JO BONGER**

Shortly after Theo and I married I wrote Vincent at St. Remy:

‘It’s high time that your new little sister came to chat with you and didn’t always just let Theo convey her regards. When we weren’t married yet I always thought: Well I don’t really dare to write to Vincent about everything yet, but now we really have become brother and sister, and I would so much like you to know me a little. For my part – its been the case for a long time – I’ve heard so much about you, both from your sister, and from Theo – and here in the house there are masses of things that are reminders of you...in bed in the morning I look straight at that beautiful flowering peach tree of yours which looks at me in such a friendly way every morning. There is also one of your paintings hanging over the piano in our drawing room.’

We named our son after his Uncle, he was born in January while Vincent was still in



the hospital at St. Remy. Vincent suffered another relapse but he did manage to recover and by May he was able to leave the hospital. Only 2 months after that he apparently committed suicide while I was in Holland. It was a great loss for Theo and me as you can imagine.

Theo took care of the funeral and invited many of his artist friends in Paris, and they came, and he put Vincent's paintings up all around the room. The priest would not let him be buried in the church cemetery, so he was buried outside the town in a graveyard overlooking the fields of wheat.

My husband was very over-worked, and after Vincent's death he became even more committed to preserving Vincent's memory. He also took on some of the same qualities of his brother, to the point that even though he had been the chief organizer of the Impressionist Show for Goupil, that had been so successful, they let him go because he became rude and demanding at the firm, on his dead brother's behalf.

This loving and sensitive man became uncivil toward me also, and his son, and had insane ideas that I was trying to harm him. I, and his family, tried to calm him but to no avail. We took him out of an asylum in Paris and moved him to one in Holland

but he did not improve. He died just 6 months after his brother. I was bereft, left with no income, many unsold canvases, and a vast cache of letters that Theo had saved.

I had to make my own way, now, with a small infant, and began to contact people about showing Vincent's work, and compiling and translating the letters between Vincent and Theo, which were eventually published. In the letters I learned how often Vincent had nothing to eat because, after buying painting supplies, he had no money left; and sometimes he slept on the ground because he could not afford shelter.

In 1905 in sympathy with what I believe were the wishes of Vincent and Theo, I became one of the founding members of the Dutch socialist party against the wishes of my family. In 1914 I had the remains of Theo moved from Utrecht to a grave next to Vincent's above the wheat fields around Auvers, so they could be together in death as they were in life.

*(Jo Bonger returns to the piano and concludes the "Moonlight Sonata" with a projection of "Starry Night" on the screen followed by the photograph of the 2 adjoining graves is projected. She then turns to the audience.)*

Good night.

*(Stage to black)*

**The End**