



The Bridge of San Luis Rey

Dramatization of Thornton Wilder's famous novel of 1927,

by Christian Lanciai (2016)

The characters:

Don Jacinto

Brother Juniper

La Perichole

a nun

Captain Alvarado

Monks of the inquisition

Doña Clara

The action takes place in Peru after Friday July 20th 1714.

Act I scene 1.

Don Jacinto I understand it was a disaster, but what good does it do to go on worrying about it?

Juniper But I can't understand it and want so much to understand it.

Don Jacinto It's nothing to understand. What happened, happened, it's just to recognize the facts and bury the casualties.

Juniper But what did they do to deserve it?

Don Jacinto Don't bother about it. Then it might go on troubling your mind.

Juniper But Don Jacinto, we are both priests and highly educated theologians. The aim of our education is for us to see a meaning about everything, since the divinity we serve is around us everywhere.

Don Jacinto But here it is only about a most ordinary accident. Things like this happen every day. God can't be held accountable for accidents. Already St. Thomas Aquinas makes that clear.

Juniper Are you joking? Are you pulling my leg? A most ordinary accident! That bridge has been holding for five hundred years and was regarded as almost the safest in all the Andes. And then suddenly it breaks without the slightest reason just as five of the most innocent persons of the country are crossing it, of which one even is a small boy!

Don Jacinto Innocent? They were ordinary people, and none of them was any special paragon of God's foremost children. The Marquesa for example was outrageously rich and notorious for her drinking. She even appeared drunk at the theatre.

Juniper While the shameless actress got away. She should also have crossed the bridge at that moment but stayed at home just on that very day for some interference by destiny.

Don Jacinto And uncle Pio. He was well known as a libertine.

Juniper Are you suggesting that all five of them deserved being hurled down the abyss?

Don Jacinto Not at all. But no one can help it that they were.

Juniper But there is a mystery here.

Don Jacinto Where is the mystery?

Juniper That all five of them were so absolutely innocent. The small child, who was carried by the mute cook, who just had lost his brother, the young nun without a wicked thought in her life, the Marquesa, who was the benefactress of the entire country, and the self-sacrificing uncle Pio. To the mystery is added the fact that the bridge exactly as they passed over it broke under their very feet, while it had sustained the heaviest possible loads of caravans for many centuries without even squeaking.

Don Jacinto What is your point?

Juniper I want to investigate the mystery. I want to find out what they had in common, if they had anything else in common than their innocence. I want to explore those powers of destiny that brought them together on this fateful day. I wish to

understand this enigmatical metaphysical context, which appears as the most inexplicable matter that ever happened to us.

Don Jacinto I am afraid you will not get anywhere.

Juniper Still I intend to try.

Don Jacinto What will you do?

Juniper I will document their lives as carefully as possible. I will collect them in a book and then see if I can draw any conclusion of the summary.

Don Jacinto I warn you. You could reach some result that would not serve anyone.

Juniper The truth cannot harm anyone.

Don Jacinto And do you think you could explore some kind of divine truth in this massive tragedy?

Juniper I think there is a possibility.

Don Jacinto I cannot wish you any good luck, but you will be obliged to account for the results to your superiors.

Juniper Of course. It will be my joy to account for any results that I could reach.

Don Jacinto For your own sake I hope you will not reach any results.

Juniper What are you afraid of?

Don Jacinto Nothing, but I am afraid for your sake. I am afraid you might set your soul at risk.

Juniper I have never been afraid of anything, neither to risk my life nor my soul on my quest for the truth.

Don Jacinto I have warned you. I wash my hands. Farewell, Don Juniper.

Juniper We will be back, Don Jacinto. (*He leaves.*)

What is he afraid of? I can't understand it. What danger and what harm could lie hidden in charting the lives of innocent people in the effort to understand their destinies? No, there could be no harm in it. It could only lead to good results by knowledge and enlightenment, and at best we could even learn something out of this formidable mystery.

Scene 2. A convent in the mountains.

Perichole (masked, with a veil) I don't want to see him.

Nun But he wishes you no harm.

Perichole I don't know him. What does he want?

Nun He wants to talk with you about the casualties.

Perichole Why? They are lost. Nothing can bring them back.

Nun He if anyone could comfort you.

Perichole No, no one could comfort me, for I bear no grief, for it has already consumed itself and me, so I have nothing left.

Nun He has come here the long way just to see you.

Perichole As if I was anything worth seeing.

Nun The least thing you owe him for his self-sacrifice is some courtesy.

Perichole You make me curious about him. Who is he really?

Nun He is the monk who should have crossed the bridge with the others but was detained and saw the others perish.

Perichole That makes him interesting. Then he must brood on the same problem as I: 'why them and not me'.

Nun I think that is his problem.

Perichole Show him in. (*The nun leaves.*) Does he try to see something metaphysical in what happened? He could hardly just be interested in me. (*enter Juniper.*)

Welcome, brother. What gives me the honour?

Juniper Like myself you belong to those who unjustly survived while the wrong people seem to have perished.

Perichole Perfectly right. What can you do about it?

Juniper Nothing. But the fact that I survived gives me by my conscience the obligation to the lost ones to do anything to do them justice.

Perichole How? They are dead. You can do nothing for them.

Juniper Since the dead never can thank you or return anything for what good you do for them, it's the greatest benefaction in life to do something for them.

Perichole And what do you suppose you could do for them?

Juniper Perhaps exonerate them. Neither uncle Pio nor the Marquesa had the best reputation in the country.

Perichole (*looks away*) I treated her shamefully.

Juniper For which she doesn't appear to have felt any resentment.

Perichole I once visited her only to ask her forgiveness. She would not hear of it and instead drowned me in blessings and gifts. There was no limit to her generosity.

Juniper She appears to have shown the same to several fallen women.

Perichole Her daughter could not stand her but ran away and went home to Spain. The old foolish frump only lived for her correspondence with her.

Juniper Why do you call her a frump?

Perichole She was a parody of herself. She was the richest woman in the country but also the most ridiculous and naïve. She didn't understand herself how cruel I was against her, when I made a fool of her at the theatre. Instead she made it worse by making a show of her intoxicated condition, the poor old beldam. She could have been the queen of Peru but only made a fool of herself.

Juniper But her good qualities were considerable.

Perichole That's just what was wrong with her. She only had good qualities. She was the most tender of all mothers towards a daughter who did not deserve her love. She was grandiosely sentimental and could never get enough of exposing her own overwhelming feelings. She was a monster of love. But everybody laughed at her, no one could take her seriously, since her outward appearance was so incongruous with her inner qualities.

Juniper You mean that the beauty, sincerity and honesty of her soul was lost in her physical abnormality and notorious drinking habits.

Perichole Just about.

Juniper How serious was really her so called drunkenness? We all grant ourselves a glass occasionally, but did she actually and seriously drink more than the rest of us? In her opulent grandiosity she gave me the impression of having had a kind of a great past. Perhaps she even was a beauty in her youth and celebrated as such, and she did actually have a daughter, whom she sincerely loved. At least the letters indicate as much. But what reasons did the daughter have to despise her and shun her?

Perichole That pear fell a long way off the tree. She had nothing in common with her mother. She was spoiled, pretentious and squeamish and outrageously ungrateful at that. She owed her mother thanks for everything but could never show any gratitude. She went to Spain only to get away from her mother and her overwhelming generosity, which she felt as stifling. But most of all she escaped from her home with its comfort and richness because it bored her.

Juniper The typical daughter of a rich parent, in other words. It would have broken any mother's heart.

Perichole The correspondence saved her. Because of that she could continue loving and worshipping her daughter at a distance, since the fact that the daughter was so far away brought the advantage that the Marquesa undisturbedly could go on idealizing her daughter, no matter how little she deserved it.

Juniper How unfair that such a warm mother's heart only was to be rewarded by the contrary of what it deserved.

Perichole But the Marquesa was not just gracious, rich and charitable. The origin of her sincere warmth and generosity was rather that she had harder sufferings behind than any greatness as a celebrated beauty. I don't know if she ever was beautiful. Her appearance did not indicate any trace of anything such. On the contrary, she had always been rather simple and common also outwardly, but her suffering ennobled her in her latter days to become our most significant benefactress.

Juniper What kind of suffering was it? Do you know anything?

Perichole After having met her myself I became interested in her person and researching her background. She was the only daughter of a hated father, who cheated all the citizens in the city of money as a hatter. He was an ice-cold businessman who only thought of property and money. The Marquesa grew up as a lonely child, since the mother left her early, probably driven by her cruel husband to death in an utterly unhappy marriage. Because of that the Marquesa never wanted to marry, but her family forced her to it, and she was obliged to enter an equally unhappy marriage as her mother. The daughter saved her life, after her only childbirth she could live wholly for her daughter and forget her ignoble husband, but her greatest tragedy was probably that her daughter turned out exactly like her father: cold and calculating, detached and critical of everything that her mother stood for. Still the mother never understood or saw through her daughter's heartlessness and inhumanity but continued in the innocence of her blind naïvety to love and adore her, and that was perhaps what saved her after all.

Juniper Still she sought her comfort in the bottle.

Perichole Otherwise she was well. She never needed any other medicines. Wine was to her like a life elixir of comfort which at least always gave her a good sleep, and the disdain and scorn which this gave reason to in her daughter and the people, who never forgot their hatred of the family because of her father, no one could understand how cruel and unfair it was.

Juniper And you yourself took part in it and gloried on stage by your ridicule of her.

Perichole The whole city took part in disgracing her. She was a ridiculous rant for everyone to make fun of. When I parodied her on the theatre with herself present on the front row she happened on that very evening to be more under the influence than usual. By her demonstration she endorsed and increased my parody. People exalted, everybody laughed, both at her and at me on stage, while she herself was not even aware of how she was made a fool of. It didn't bother her at all. I understood that afterwards when I visited her to apologise. Then I suddenly realized the macabre injustice in the mockery of her by the whole town, while at the same time I acquired respect of her greatness as a human being. She was simply born magnanimous.

Juniper And that made you repent your entire career.

Perichole Not at all. I regretted nothing, except my parody of her, which I retracted and she forgave without hesitation when I asked her.

Juniper But why then did you leave Lima and the stage?

Perichole Don't you know?

Juniper How could I know? I never go to the theatre.

Perichole But you must have heard something.

Juniper What should I have heard?

Perichole Did I succeed so well concealing my secret? Why do you think I never receive visitors? Why do you think I hide behind a veil? Why do you think I never show my beautiful face any more?

Juniper I haven't the faintest idea.

Perichole I got the small pox. As soon as it was clear to me I retired immediately and left the city to isolate myself here up in the mountains beyond all public life. Perhaps it was my punishment for my wanton life as a leading actress with both the viceroy and countless others for my lovers, or for having taking part in ridiculing the Marquesa, but the cruellest punishment was not the illness itself with its disfiguring scars for life, but the fact that I had to survive myself and was refused to perish with the others in the disaster at San Luis Rey.

Juniper So you see no meaning in the fact that you got away?

Perichole None at all, if it wasn't an additional punishment, as if I hadn't been punished enough already. Even my child was punished, since Esteban would have brought it to Lima to be educated. Both went down with the bridge. The question is who was more innocent, Esteban, my child or the Marquesa.

Juniper They all three appear to have been utterly innocent.

Perichole Exactly, while I have to live, the only shameless and guilty one in the entire company.

Juniper Uncle Pio?

Perichole Outrageously wicked and adventurous, a true libertine but at the same time a warm human friend. In spite of his extravagance he was predominantly good and as undeserving as the others of being sacrificed in the fall.

Juniper As I see it we are facing an overwhelming mystery. All these five persons who perished in the fall, Esteban, uncle Pio, your child, the Marquesa and her ward sister Pepita from the convent appear more and more like sacrificed saints who in their death found something like their apotheosis.

Perichole Would God then have sacrificed them by some terrible injustice?

Juniper God had nothing to do with it. It was a matter of theirs, not of His.

Perichole Will you write that in your book?

Juniper I find this more and more to be the truth, and that I must write down.

Perichole What will the authorities say about that?

Juniper What could they say about it?

Perichole The inquisition could find some reason for objection.

Juniper The inquisition belongs to my own holy church. If I make myself guilty of a rehabilitation and exoneration of these five lost innocents, it could only be a labour favoured by the grace of God which the inquisition could only respect.

Perichole Not if it appears that either God had nothing to do with it or that he sacrificed five innocents in a death of injustice.

Juniper My intention is good and cannot be misinterpreted.

Perichole I am afraid that an authority like the inquisition could misinterpret anything by giving it a personal interpretation differing from the intention.

Juniper Could they be so blind?

Perichole Could you be so blind and naïve as to not be able to see it? Then you are as clueless as the Marquesa.

Juniper I can't deny my work and have to complete it, as my obligation to the souls and destinies of the five casualties.

Perichole It is noble of you, but you have to take my warning seriously.

Juniper I cannot fail my duty.

Perichole It's your destiny. I hope to God that this will not lead to a similar outrageous injustice as the death of the five innocents.

Juniper I am not afraid.

Perichole Therefore I am afraid for your sake.

Juniper I have no choice. I just have to go to the bottom of this unfathomable tragedy, which could contain some important metaphysical secret with a hidden message for us mortals.

Perichole Perhaps the five so violently and suddenly lost try to reach us from the other side with this message?

Juniper Do you think it is possible? Would any of them have had any reason?

Perichole Hardly the Marquesa. She was finished. My child still didn't understand anything. Pepita and uncle Pio? Hardly. Pepita was too simple and uncle Pio too pragmatic. Maybe Esteban...

Juniper What about Esteban?

Perichole He had a brother who died. They were very remarkable as twins. They were like married to each other and always kept together and even used a language of their own which only they could understand. I was the one who came between them, which led to the death of one of them.

Juniper How?

Perichole They worked as copyists. They copied notes and songs for the choirs and singers, they copied entire motets and were frequently used as secretaries, and that's how I came in contact with them. I needed someone to whom I could dictate my secret letters and use as a messenger.

Juniper Which one of them?

Perichole You could not see any difference between them. Sometimes they switched their roles, so you could never be certain as to who was who. I thought I applied Manuel, but he fell in love with me. This came between their relationship as brothers and caused a disturbance. Then Manuel decided to disrupt his contact with me and would not write any more letters. But I was not ready yet and looked them up again. I found Esteban, but he said he was Manuel. I thought I had got Manuel back, but it was Esteban. There was only one letter. Shortly afterwards Manuel fell ill. He damaged his leg, and there was blood poisoning and gangrene. He died in a few days.

Juniper You can't blame yourself for that.

Perichole I don't. It was an accident, but twins are vulnerable. I think the fast development of Manuel's illness crisis was a nervous reaction to the shock of that Esteban had made a contact with me which he had broken for the sake of his brother.

Juniper How did Esteban react to his death?

Perichole He became like a shadow of his former self. He left Cuzco and went down to the harbour of Lima to work there as a longshoreman but soon came back again. He was completely lost without his brother. A captain Alvarado came after him and persuaded him to follow on an extensive expedition. Esteban was difficult to persuade, he thought he could not leave Peru, and then one night he tried to hang himself. Captain Alvarado was in the bar below and heard some suspicious sounds from the attic and instinctively ran up and succeeded in saving the youth just as he had kicked off the chair. When captain Alvarado had saved his life and he was docile and cooperatively apathetic, the captain had no difficulty in persuading him to follow him on a wholesome journey. They left Cuzco together, but the captain could not cross the bridge with his animals but had to take a longer path down into the gorge and use a ferry across the stream. But Esteban walked with the others across the bridge.

Juniper Is captain Alvarado still in the country?

Perichole I don't think so. If he is, he is in Lima.

Juniper I will search for him there. He could tell me more about Esteban. Was he the one you entrusted your child?

Perichole Yes, it was. Pepita went by the Marquesa to support her, while uncle Pio walked with Esteban.

Juniper And I should have walked with them. Why didn't I? What stopped me? What kept me from going? Why did I remain just standing and gaping totally without reason? Why should these five innocent people perish and I have to watch it without being able to follow them? I feel guilty of a crime of wanting solidarity, and my guilt for alone being alive of them is greater than anyone's could be of their death. That's how it feels.

Perichole It's the emptiness after those who suddenly had to break up. It always implies unjustified feelings of guilt. My feelings of guilt were at least reasonable and justified.

Juniper Impossible.

Perichole I was guilty of the child, and my punishment was its sacrifice. I was guilty of Manuel's death, and my punishment was that also Esteban was sacrificed. I took part in disgracing the Marquesa and in ridiculing her in public, and my punishment was that she also was sacrificed. Uncle Pio was my relative, who took care of me and protected me all my life, I was always ungrateful to him, and my punishment was that he also was sacrificed. I alone was guilty of all their deaths.

Juniper You must not say that.

Perichole I have said it. As if I hadn't already been punished enough for my promiscuous life as the mistress of many by the abhorrent illness that has disfigured me for life, I also have to survive my closest of kin and my own son, who was sacrificed only to enable my guilt to overwhelm me with additional crushing weight. No, brother Juniper, you were exactly as completely innocent as all the unjustly victimized casualties.

Juniper Don't mention them as unjustly sacrificed. It was an accident and nothing else.

Perichole Was it? That bridge has held on for five hundred years and was the safest between Lima and Cuzco! Why would it break under just five people, when for centuries caravans have been crossing it? And why would it break just under these five, the fates of which I was part to blame for? And Manuel at that, who already unfairly had met his death as a prelude to the great disaster! That no one could see this as an omen!

Juniper This is the great mystery we have to examine. Was it an indication by higher powers, or was it just really a banal accident like any mountain landslide?

Perichole That you must certainly be able to observe in its obviousness that it couldn't be a coincidence, when all these five destinies and mine were so intimately mixed up with each other already.

Juniper But what was the meaning? If it just wasn't a banal accident it must have had some meaning. Can you understand it?

Perichole That's for you to find out as a theologian. But I fear the result could prove the contrary to theology.

Juniper How so?

Perichole It's just a feeling, a manifestation of my instinct and intuition. Didn't your brother in the order ask you to desist from the investigation from the beginning?

Juniper Yes.

Perichole He felt the same way.

Juniper I can't just abandon it.

Perichole No, you can't, even if you would be aware that it would lead to terrible consequences.

Juniper I don't understand what you are afraid of.

Perichole Neither do I, but there is something.

Juniper Let's pass over to uncle Pio.

Perichole Alas, you make all my wounds bleed afresh, one after the other.

Juniper This has to be done if the wounds will have any chance to heal.

Perichole I treated him most shamefully of all, and yet he was the one who was closest to me.

Juniper Closer than all your lovers?

Perichole He gave me everything. He was the one who made me. He discovered me and pulled me out of the gutter and taught me everything about the theatre. Without him I would never have become anything more than a gutter harlot. He made me a primadonna.

Juniper And what happened then? Why did you leave him and the theatre?

Perichole Alas, father Juniper, I was everyone's mistress. Everybody worshipped me. Uncle Pio turned me into a saint except the contrary, I was the saint of the theatre and love but far from any virtuous saint of chastity. I made a sport of furthering myself in every conceivable field, and I actually succeeded in turning myself into such a brilliant and celebrated actress that I had no competition at all, but you need competition and challenges. Or else you are consumed by boredom. I finally found myself in that death trap and therefore left the theatre, which uncle Pio never could accept. He never tired in his efforts to get me back. He even threatened to send me to Madrid to make an even more brilliant career. I refused. And then I had the small pox. Then I had nothing else to do but to retire to my country house and cut all ties with my previous life. Therefore I also disconnected uncle Pio. But he didn't give up but came up here into the mountains after me.

Juniper Did he know about your illness?

Perichole Of course he knew about it. Everybody knew about it. Everybody talked about it and mocked me in my absence. I had after all been the leading beauty of the country and practically its queen, I actually gave birth to three children to the viceroy, he was not my worst lover, and then this goddess of beauty and uncrowned queen of Peru gets the small pox. What a rant!

Juniper But surely he then must have understood that you could not return on stage.

Perichole That's not why he came here. He wanted to take my son away from me. He wanted to bring him up and give him a regular education and take him with him

to Lima. But little Jaime was ill. That's why I would not let him remain at the viceroy's with his brothers and sisters but thought the fresh mountain air would perhaps make him well, but it didn't.

Juniper So uncle Pio persuaded you to allow him to take your son with him to Lima to care for his health and progress.

Perichole It was a good will that I could not refuse, although little Jaime's case was hopeless. He was an epileptic, and who can cure that? The fits come suddenly and always at the worst possible inconvenience, and there was nothing that little Jaime feared more than to have a fit in public. Uncle Pio took on a hopeless case, which only would give him more troubles and sufferings, but he wanted to do it for my sake.

Juniper And they both went down into the abyss. What an irony.

Perichole Leave me in peace now, bother Juniper. Go on with your investigation as much as you want, question also captain Alvarado and Don Andrés, but I have nothing more to offer you. I was the only one of all these victims who actually desired my own death, all the others had something to live for, and then I am the only one who has to live on while all the others including poor Manuel, who loved me, were sacrificed for nothing. What on earth could be the meaning of such an absurd irony?

Juniper That's the question. Still I ask your permission to return to you if I would need more complementary details. But I will follow your advice and first have some talks with both Don Andrés and captain Alvarado.

Perichole I don't think they can help you with more than contributing to your most dubious book, which could cause you formidable inconvenience.

Juniper Why?

Perichole Because you are researching the truth. Nothing could be more devastating in its annihilating nakedness.

Juniper I take the risk. It is included in my vocation.

Perichole It is your funeral. I wash your hands and will prepare myself for the worst fate of all those involved including yours, namely to have to survive you all with both disfigurement, dishonour and incurable remorse without end.

Juniper (rising) I will be back, *(politely kissing her hand for a farewell)* if for nothing else, then for my belief that I am the only one who really could comfort you. *(leaves)*

Perichole (after he is gone) What a naïve fool and perhaps the worst of them all! The Marquesa pathetically gave herself to the illusion about her daughter's non-existent virtues and good graces, uncle Pio has all his life devoted himself to the adoration and furthering of my unworthiness in an effort to turn it to its contrary, poor Esteban only had his brother to live for and followed him in death, and the virgin Pepita thought she could find a better life outside the convent with the Marquesa and in her company only found her destruction and death. And then brother Juniper comes here believing he could create some order in this metaphysical chaos of the extreme injustice and godlessness of destiny. I fear that he is the worst fool of them all.

Scen 3. A joint in the harbour of Callao.

Captain Alvarado sitting alone by himself at a table but casually associating with the surroundings, when brother Juniper enters and asks his way up to him.

Juniper (taking a seat) Captain Alvarado, I presume?

Alvarado The same. With whom have I the honour?

Juniper Brother Juniper.

Alvarado Of course. I remember. You were there on that day.

Juniper And you as well.

Alvarado I saw them fall down and could do nothing.

Juniper Same here. But you saw them from below, while I saw them from above.

Alvarado How can I help you? Why have you looked me up?

Juniper I was afraid you had already left the country.

Alvarado I am on my way, but I decided to wait until after the funeral. One of them, you know, was the richest and in a way the most legendary lady of the country. There will be a great ceremony in the cathedral, and the church will be filled at once.

Juniper I searched for you everywhere, and I praise my lucky star that I have found you.

Alvarado But what can I do for you?

Juniper You were a good friend of Esteban's and on one occasion saved his life.

Alvarado That is correct. He should have sailed with me. Everything was ready and prepared. I would have opened up a new life to him. He was completely set on making a fresh start. And then this happens.

Juniper It's such an extensive and incredible disaster that I have decided to go to the bottom of it. For that reason I am writing a book about the five fates, but many question marks will remain unanswered.

Alvarado I am certain of it. The incident was incredible. That bridge has held on since the great age of the Incas and was the safest bridge in the Andes. It was told about it, that as long as it would keep the road between Cuzco and Lima intact, the kingdom of the Incas would never fall. Now it has fallen and really without any reason, it was not worn out and had carried caravans of any heaviness and length, so the question that arises is which empire is about to fall? The Spanish? I don't think so.

Juniper How did you know Esteban?

Alvarado Both brothers worked for me here in the harbour at periods. They loaded and unloaded ships. They needed to get away from Lima and from the mountains sometimes. One of them was working for that primadonna and unluckily fell in love with her. It almost ended in disaster.

Juniper It did end in disaster. Manuel died, you know.

Alvarado Of blood poisoning. That was not her fault.

Juniper It is still impossible not to link his fate with that of La Perichole, just because he was tragically in love with her, which harmed the twin relationship.

Alvarado I know. They were inseparable and completely dependent on each other. When Manuel died Esteban became like a shadow of himself, as if it was he who had been separated from life and not his brother. It was heart-rending to see. I couldn't allow him to go under. He threatened to disappear and dissolve like a shadow. That's why I took him on, but still he tried to hang himself. Fortunately I kept constant watch over him, I knew that he was at risk and threatened to go over the top any moment, and when he got himself a rope and I heard suspicious sounds from the attic, I knew what was going on. You learn by sailing to identify the least sound from the rig and especially its warning signals. If I had come a moment later he would have been lost. Instead of stretching and breaking his neck, I caught him up. Then he was easy to persuade to at least leave his old life behind.

Juniper Did you know the Marquesa and her ward, the young Pepita?

Alvarado Not at all. But I knew La Perchole the better.

Juniper How come?

Alvarado I was never one of her lovers, just like uncle Pio never was. But she was the viceroy's mistress for years, she had three children with him, two daughters and a sickly boy – yes, you know, he was also among the casualties. They used to give banquets together late at night, and sometimes the viceroy invited special guests, like Don Jacinto, our archbishop, and even me. Uncle Pio was often there as well, and we had extremely entertaining nights together with easy talk about the whole world literature and the theatre – uncle Pio was the most learned man in the country, and Don Jacinto was never far behind, but in the centre was of course always Camila Perichole, or Micaela Villegas as her real name was. She was after all the queen of Peru who always were at the centre of things, and even in intellectual discussions and hot debates she was absolutely brilliant. Uncle Pio had brought her up and practically created her. He pulled her out of the gutter and made her into something that she would never have become by any other means.

Juniper How was she in relationship with the Marquesa and her ward Pepita?

Alvarado She shamed the Marquesa at the theatre and gave her an even worse reputation than she had herself, people had never laughed so much at the theatre as they did when La Perichole parodied her, the Marquesa as you know lived on her weaknesses, one was the ungrateful daughter who was a worthless nobody, and the other weakness was the bottle. But she was a good wife who did a lot of good, and afterwards Camila repented and went to Canossa to her to apologise. Camila was then overwhelmed by the fact that the Marquesa did not hold the faintest grudge against her no matter how much she had humiliated her, and she melted like wax in the Marquesa's hands and became her sole admirer. She often spoke with me about this. She could never give enough of her enormous respect of her warm magnanimity. That was probably a side of the Marquesa that no one else here in the country ever got any insight into.

Juniper My most sensitive question to you concerns the bridge. If you yourself refused to cross it with your animals, how could you then permit the others to walk over it?

Alvarado It just turned out that way. It was the nearest way and most convenient for them to just walk it. My animals were too heavily loaded and would have tottered on the bridge and perhaps fallen off. It would have been stupid to take that risk. But on foot there was no danger. But why didn't you follow them? Were you not supposed to? Was there anything that held you back?

Juniper I have wondered and brooded about that myself ever since it happened. Why them and not me? The bridge was passed daily by hundreds of people, and not even the viceroy or the archbishop have never hesitated to walk across it. It was like an unwritten law that it was a bridge that never could break. Why then did it break and under these five persons? And why was I spared? Was it to enable me to write their book and unravel the secret of this awesomely mystical destiny?

Alvarado Do you have any idea?

Juniper I have been sitting for days with La Perichole and discussed the matter with her. She lost her two closest of kin, her uncle and her son, while she was the only one of them, she claims, who had deserved to die and who also gladly would have done so. Uncle Pio looked her up in the mountains just to offer to take care of her son and give him a comfortable and decent life in Lima, his journey and enterprise was a most commendable self-sacrifice, and then he was punished in such a way. And the Marquesa? What had she done except only good? And her ward, a young nun and absolute virgin? And the small child? And Esteban, whom I saw myself taking over the boy from uncle Pio's shoulders, since uncle Pio was tired and had carried him for long. Even his last act of his life was an act of charity and self-sacrifice, and he had just decided to begin a new life with you and start afresh with a vengeance, when this happens. Even the Marquesa had reconciled herself with her destiny, with La Perichole and raised her admiration and affection and with her daughter far away in Spain and looked forward to life with faith, hope and joy since the daughter was on her way back to her again. It is unfathomable. No matter how hard I have tried to discern some meaning with the matter I have only found the contrary.

Alvarado Is the book completed?

Juniper Practically.

Alvarado The risk is that its commendable truthfulness with the clear indication that none of the lost deserved to die but only the contrary, and that no divine meaning whatsoever could be found in the matter, could be received by the church with some demurrals.

Juniper Do you also wish to warn me?

Alvarado Have others done so?

Juniper La Perichole.

Alvarado She is right. I feel the same thing. The careful documentation of this story could mean some danger for you, since the church could misinterpret the intention and meaning.

Juniper But there is no meaning except to present a commending testimony about the five casualties.

Alvarado As a protest against the injustice of destiny? But you embarked on the task with the intention to discover some kind of metaphysical meaning. If you can't find any, the project has failed by backfire.

Juniper But I owe them the truth of their stories.

Alvarado I have warned you, and La Perichole has warned you.

Juniper I can't turn back. I have gone too far out on the bridge to be able to return.

Alvarado So you intend to join them?

Juniper No one can stop me. I should have followed them from the start. I was spared only to be given the opportunity to testify to their innocence and holiness.

Alvarado And thus you become holy yourself. I deplore you.

Juniper But the work makes me happy, and I believe the five also were happy when they suddenly were interrupted in the middle of their success.

Alvarado We'll meet in the cathedral, brother. Good luck. I myself intend to leave everything behind never to look back or return. Esteban would have preferred it that way, and also you should have allowed the lost ones to continue their own way in peace.

Juniper We shall see. I have done what I had to do, since no one else could do it. Good luck yourself, captain.

Alvarado Thanks, brother. *(They shake hands there by the table, and brother Juniper breaks it up. The captain remains and continues to poculate and associate casually with the other customers.)*

Scene 4. The inquisition.

Brother Juniper is brought to trial in a tribunal of hooded inquisitors,
led by Don Jacinto, archbishop of Peru.

Jacinto We have summoned you here, brother Juniper, just to beg you to answer a few questions concerning your book.

Juniper I am at your disposal and have nothing to hide.

Jacinto What exactly do you mean by having written and distributed this book?

Juniper I wanted to do justice to the casualties by carefully examining their fates, which all were mixed up with each other, trying to find some meaning and hopefully some metaphysical meaning with this tragedy.

Jacinto Did you find any?

Juniper No, but I haven't given up yet.

Jacinto So you intend to go on with this matter?

Juniper Why not? I have only tried to do some good, and there is no benefaction more highly considered than doing good for the deceased, since they neither can thank you, reward you or give anything in return.

Jacinto Your intentions may have been the best ones, and we know you as a pious and benevolent monk who only has done good so far, but still we find the tendency of your work disturbing.

Juniper Why?

Jacinto Don't you see yourself that you question the entire theological and divine world order by questioning the meaning of the fall of these five people?

Juniper Just because it seemed so meaningless, I searched the more eagerly for some meaning of it.

Jacinto But you found none?

Juniper Not so far.

Jacinto And what possible meaning do you think you could find?

Juniper I can't know as long as I haven't found it.

Jacinto And how could you find it, when all five of them are dead, so that none of them could in any way answer your questions and doubts? Or do you mean you could find some complementary information from any of the survivors? Captain Alvarado has left the country and is not likely to ever return, and the famous actress in question lives completely isolated in her convent and has nothing more to say. How do you think then you could get any more answers to your questioning of the meaning of the incident?

Juniper I admit it doesn't look very hopeful.

Jacinto And then we face a problem, my good brother Juniper. You have questioned the divine world order, and your failure in finding any meaning in what has happened threatens and challenges the theological world aspect, so that you could consider it philosophically denied. Do you admit to this?

Juniper I admit that there are question marks but that these problems can be solved.

Jacinto But you can't solve them. Thereby your challenge and spite against our world order is a fact, which we cannot accept. In fact, it constitutes a foundation for, I tremble and fear to express the word, atheism.

Juniper I do not think so.

Jacinto But it is a fact, brother Juniper, that cannot be denied. It is almost pure mathematics. Everything in your book leads to the conclusion that the five deaths were no less than the most meaningless and godless injustice.

Juniper Could you claim anything else yourselves?

Jacinto You admit it yourself! But such a denial of the divine justice and the ubiquitous divine world order is a crime against the church to which you belong.

Juniper You don't understand. You have misunderstood this book. It is only intended as a documentation of the fates of these five good and innocent people for the sake of their good names and in the name of universal humanism. I had no other intention with the book.

Jacinto But you have admitted yourself that you searched for a divine meaning with their enigmatic fates without finding it.

Juniper That is correct, but that does not mean that it has to be non-existent.

Jacinto But the fact that you haven't been able to trace it no matter how hard you tried must be interpreted as an effort to prove its non-existence.

Juniper You don't understand.

Jacinto No, brother Juniper, you are the one who doesn't understand. You don't see the wholeness of what you have written. You don't understand that what you have written is an unquestionable formula and proof of that God cannot exist.

Juniper That was never my intention!

Jacinto But it is the result, which unfortunately cannot be denied, as long as this book exists. Therefore we must destroy it.

Juniper Then you once more murder the five innocents who already were lost.

Jacinto It is your fault. You are the one who has written the book. We must do it for the sake of the church.

Juniper Don't you see that you in that case actually attack and dig the grave of your own church?

Jacinto How so?

Juniper By virtual suicide in the destruction of its credibility.

Jacinto Brother, don't you see that you have turned into a heretic?

Juniper By documenting the truth?

Jacinto By showing its consequences. You don't admit it yourself, since it wasn't your original intention, but the result is undeniable. The book that displays this overall picture can not be allowed to exist and neither its author, as long as he can't deny his work.

Juniper What will you do?

Jacinto If you stick to the truth of this book, we must burn you with the book at the stake.

Juniper You don't realize what you are doing.

Jacinto We have no choice. We are servants of the church and live only for the church which you also did until you made yourself guilty of this book.

Juniper Don Jacinto, you are blind and can't see yourself that you are!

Jacinto I warned you from the beginning of digging in this mystery, for I saw that nothing good could come out of it. Now that you anyway have persisted in pursuing your investigation, it appears to the horror of all of us that the sum of your investigation is the denial of the very ground for the existence of the holy church. We are sorry for you, brother Juniper.

Juniper No, Don Jacinto, I am the one who feels sorry for you. I always served my church in implicit faith and piety and made sure to only do good throughout my life, which you all can testify to. This book is perhaps my foremost and most enduring benefaction of my life, for no work could be considered more beneficial than a benefaction for the dead. And I warn you. You will not be able to delete the existence of this book, for if you destroy those copies that you find available, the rest of the copies will be hidden away and preserved and the more certainly lead to new editions. And then this crime of yours against piety and humanism will accuse you and the church.

Jacinto (loud) You have heard the heretic's defence speech! He refuses to retract anything he has written! What is your verdict?

The monks He has committed himself to the stake.

Juniper I have nothing more to say, for what I have already said will remain even when all of you are gone. I realize there is no hope for you or for your church the way you treat it, which would not have been possible at home in Italy, where I come from, which always refused to establish any inquisition.

Jacinto Now you talk nonsense. Didn't the Holy Father in Rome burn Giordano Bruno at the stake by the inquisition?

Juniper Yes, and that was also a mistake which the church will find reasons to bitterly regret, when Giordano Bruno according to his own words will prove himself to have been right in three hundred years.

Monks (furious) Heretic! Heretic!

Jacinto He has condemned himself! Take him out!

(Some of the from top to toe hooded black monks seize Juniper and lead him out during animated discussions and upsets and increasing uproar. Don Jacinto retires.)

Scene 5. A convent.

La Perichole sitting as usual veiled alone in deep thought in a beautiful garden, when a young lady enters and approaches her.

Clara Camila Perichole?

Perichole Yes. Who are you?

Clara They told me I could find you here. We had a friend in common.

Perichole You don't seem to belong here at all. Are you from Spain?

Clara Yes, I arrived from there last week.

Perichole But who are you, and how do you know me?

Clara I don't know you, but my mother knew you.

Perichole (beginning to understand) The Marquesa de Montemayor?

Clara Yes. She was my mother.

Perichole (acquires something dreamy about her, by old memories) She was a noble woman. Everybody made a fool of her including me, but no one understood the width of her magnanimity and noble generosity.

Clara Even I treated her wrongly by my abominable ingratitude. After her death not a day has passed without my feeling ashamed of her unjust disdain of her.

Perichole Still you do remember her. Many have already forgotten her.

Clara You also remember her.

Perichole But after us no one will remember her any more.

Clara Was there ever any clarity in how the accident at all could take place?

Perichole A pious Italian monk, who had done much good for the Indians in the mountains, made every effort to get to the bottom of all the details of the accident

and worked for a long time on a book which would explain everything, but he was burned at the stake, and the book was burned with him.

Clara But a book is not destroyed that easily. Usually there are always unknown copies turning up that tend to multiply.

Perichole In that case they are suppressed and filed in the Index. He was excommunicated as a heretic, and no one dares to have anything to do with such dangerous matters. No, my little sister, we will never see that book. Perhaps someone will discover it and bring it into daylight in a more enlightened future, but we have to be content with being the only ones who remember your mother.

Clara And the others who went down? Did they have any relatives?

Perichole Sister Pepita was a simple novice of the convent without a family. Only your mother was close to her. Esteban was alone after the loss of his brother. Only I knew uncle Pio well. And my son is probably not even remembered by his sisters in Spain. I am afraid that we are quite alone with what only we still know and remember about the accident.

Clara But what was then the meaning of it?

Perichole On the quest for an answer to that question, brother Juniper sacrificed his life. But I know one thing. Your mother really loved you.

Clara Yes, I know she did.

Perichole And I know that uncle Pio loved me. Esteban loved his brother Manuel, who also loved me and died for his love, and I loved my poor ailing son. And somehow, little sister, (*embraces her*) this love is still something that remains and the only remaining thing. When also we are dead and forgotten, we still loved one day and that sincerely enough and more than enough to last forever. All the rest may be forgotten, but this can never be forgotten but will always live on. Our names mean nothing, our deeds mean nothing, our fates mean nothing, but once we loved, that means everything. That, little sister, I think is the meaning that brother Juniper searched for and never gave up his quest for, although he was burned at the stake.

Clara What you say, elder sister, seems to me to make some sense. Although I never answered my mother's love, I know and feel still today that she is still alive in it.

Perichole Exactly. Let's live for our love as long as we live, my friend, for that is all we have to live for. (*keeps hugging her, and they remain together.*)

The End.

*Gothenburg, January 30th, 2016,
translated in June 2021.*

Post script.

The bridge at San Luis Rey on the road between Cuzco and Lima breaks on July 20th 1714 while five walking people are crossing it. A sixth person, a certain brother Juniper, who should have walked with them across the bridge, remains for some reason at the bridge-head and watches the entire disaster without being able to do anything. Afterwards he decides to find some sort of a spiritual meaning with the catastrophe by carefully researching the lives of the five casualties and their possible connections with each other. The results are documented in a book, all according to a novel published 1927 by Thornton Wilder, which was filmed three times, the last time as late as in 2004 by an Irish female director which was released in Spain, which film met with no understanding at all, as both the audience and the critics rejected it. Still it remains one of the most beautiful films ever made.

The film like the novel is completely dominated by the Marquesa de Montemayor, gorgeously played by Kathy Bates, while we have chosen not to include her in this chamber play except as the more frequently spoken of instead. The novel only casually mentions the trial of brother Juniper, while the film is almost dominated by this, since it runs in portions throughout the film. The viceroy Don Andrés, as historical a person as La Perichole, we have chosen not to include at all. The novel is an indispensable classic not just for its intriguing subject but above all for its exceptionally beautiful language, which is like poetry all the way. It's not a large book, it's even less than 150 pages, but it is extremely concisely written and deserves to be read any number of times, since you are bound to discover new important details every time. Experts on it have recommended readers to reread it at least once every year. Here in the play we have chosen to depart from both the form of the novel and the film to instead find an even more concentrated form of its own in a chamber play.