

TONTINE by MARSALI TAYLOR

CHARACTERS

MODERN TEENAGERS:

SHARON
MANDY
ELLIE

THE SILK WORKERS, 1791:

MARIE - a draw-girl
CECILE her pattern-reader
JEAN their shuttle-thrower
ANNE a reeler
THERESE - a reeler
JEANNE - the unwinder
YVETTE - the cocoon boiler
BERTHE- the new worker
GUY the master and owner of the workshop, a shuttle thrower
CATHERINE - his wife - a pattern-reader
BERTRANDE - his younger sister, Catherine and Guy's draw-girl

OTHER CHARACTERS, 1791:

DENISE his oldest sister
PIERRE-MARIE - a pedlar
MME DUMONCEAU - the companion of a rich customer
A NUN

Written for a cast of up to 17: 3 Male, 14 Female, this is best done with that number.

At a pinch though, the following could be doubled to make a cast of 14: 3 boys and 11 girls:

Two of the modern girls could be doubled to make one character.
A couple of the girls - say Yvette and Therese - could be doubled, though this would weaken the groupings for the pattern dialogue.
Denise and Madame Dumonceau could be played by one actor - but there'd be a quickish change.
The Nun, a tiny part, in any case, could be doubled - most easily with Berthe at the beginning and Marie at the end.

The running time, uncut, is approx one hour. Or, for a shorter play, it could be cut to exclude some of the periphery characters, focusing on the main ones, doubled with the modern teenagers. Linked together with the silk-workers' chants, it could still be an effective piece.

EXTRACT ONE

The lights come up on the Hotel Dieu Museum, Lyons. Left and Centre, two high rectangular looms. An aristocrat, Madame Dumonceau, is posed as a dummy in front of the left-hand one. In the background, shadowy figures - lying or sitting - and a white-coiffed nun on a seat near the front, with a ledger in her lap. You're not sure at first whether they're part of the display, until they begin to move as the ghosts of the hospital as it was.

NUN Name?

MARIE Marie Dubois.

Marie is registering at the hospital, accompanied by Jean and Berthe. After these introductory lines, the rest is done in dumb-show behind, and at the same time as, the modern scene which follows. The following, then, is done in dumb-show only. Marie gives details, which the nun writes in a ledger. She then unties her boots, giving them to the nun, who brings them down front. Finally, reluctantly, she takes off her shawl and drapes it around Berthe's shoulders. Berthe shakes her head and returns it. A last hug for Berthe, a long look and handshake for Jean, then Jean leads Berthe off, leaving Marie to come forward at the end of the modern scene.

As soon as the above dumb-show begins, three teenagers, Sharon, Mandy and Ellie, come on, looking around. They are fashionably dressed, in a mixture of brand names and ethnic stuff. Sharon has a clip-board and pencil.

ELLIE Come to France, the home of food, wine and fashion - and what do our teachers give us? A morning researching the silk industry.
MANDY That's fashion.
ELLIE I was hoping for something more recent.
SHARON **looking at the 'dummy' of Madame Dumonceau** 'Gown and petticoat of Lyons silk, late 1780s.'
MANDY Imagine running for the bus in that.
ELLIE Anyway, what has this place to do with the silk industry? It used to be a convent.
SHARON A convent hospice. The Hotel Dieu, Lyons.
ELLIE Whatever.
MANDY **pausing in front of shawls pinned out on a board** These shawls are pretty.
ELLIE Shawls?
MANDY **in front of another table** Pairs of boots?
SHARON Notebooks.
MANDY **picking one up** Thermidor, year 2: 12 francs.
ELLIE Thermidor?
MANDY It's really spidery writing...
SHARON Put it back! it says not to touch.
MANDY Where?
SHARON Priere de ne pas toucher, s.v.p.
MANDY Oops.

As she lets the book fall, a shadow girl, Anne, comes over to pick it up and reads it regretfully.

ELLIE Thermidor? Year 2?
SHARON That was the calendar of the French Revolution. I can't remember what month Thermidor was. Year 2 would be 1791 or something.
MANDY So what's with the notebooks?
SHARON You can read too, you know.
MANDY It's in French.
SHARON English translation below.
ELLIE **already reading** Oh, I get it - the silk girls kept a note of their wages ... no, the mill-owner did, and when they left, he coughed up.

The nun takes her chair and ledger and exits. Marie moves to the front to take a ladle of water to help her smother her coughing fit.

MANDY Twelve francs doesn't sound much. Hey, I thought women didn't work then anyway. Get to sixteen, get married, have kids, stay home.

The lights begin to change to the silk factory. The change is slow as one reality gives way to another.

ALL except the modern girls **in a staggered whisper** The silk workers.

The following dialogue begins softly, gaining in strength. The speakers don't look at Marie who is visibly ill, every move an effort. As they speak, the girls take up their positions.

SHARON The factories in Lyons were staffed by girls from the country, who began to work in their early teens.
YVETTE The cocoon boiler. The start of the pattern. Stir the pot.
JEANNE Fish out the cocoons.
SHARON They could work for up to fifteen years before they had saved a dowry.
THERESE Fetch more.
ANNE Fetch wood.
YVETTE Don't stop.
MANDY A dowry?
JEANNE The unwinder.
SHARON Money to marry on.
THERESE Find the thread ends.
JEANNE Almost too fine to see.
ELLIE **horrified** Fifteen years?
ANNE Pass them to us.
SHARON That's what it says.
YVETTE & JEANNE Don't stop.
ELLIE **softer, disbelieving** Fifteen years.

The lighting change is now complete.

THERESE & ANNE The reelers.
THERESE Twist the threads together.
ANNE Put the reels in the dye vat.
THERESE Take them out.

Marie returns to her place.

JEANNE **helping** Hang them up to dry.
YVETTE, JEANNE, THERESE & ANNE Don't stop.
CECILE & CATHERINE Pattern readers.
CATHERINE Count the threads.
CECILE Call out the colours.
YVETTE, JEANNE, THERESE, ANNE, CECILE & CATHERINE Don't stop.
MARIE & BERTRANDE Draw-girls.
BERTRANDE The most skilled.
MARIE Highest paid.
BERTRANDE Quick, nimble fingers.
MARIE Raising the warps.
BERTRANDE Inserting the threads.
MARIE Making the pattern.
JEAN The weaver. Saving to set up on his own. [**He comes forward to Marie, smiling.**] A girl with a dowry wouldn't hurt.
MARIE Maybe. [**Smiling, teasing him.**] Maybe not. Plenty of threads on the loom.
JEAN Set up the warp. Throw the shuttle.
ALL Don't stop.
GUY The master silk-weaver.

BERTRANDE His sister.
 GUY A family business.
 BERTRANDE Working for her dowry, like everyone else.
 CATHERINE His wife.
 GUY Catherine - the designer. People are asking for our patterns.
 BERTRANDE Sprays of flowers curling over the cloth.
 CATHERINE *indicating a box which acts as a cot placed near to her* His child.
 Nicole.
 GUY A daughter.

Ignoring him, Catherine goes over to pick up her baby and cuddles her.

ALL *except Catherine* Don't stop. Don't stop. Don't stop.

Here follows the weaving group dialogues: simultaneous, soft, rapid, the girls talking in pairs to each other, the men repeating the number as they throw the shuttle. Each pattern line is said three times before the numbers: one, two, three, four, tally.

Catherine puts her baby back down and joins her group.

Groups 1 & 2 perform the following numbers dialogues

GROUP 1: MARIE, CECILE, JEAN.

MARIE One.
 JEAN One.
 CECILE ***the following said as one continuous line with pauses to let Marie count the threads.*** Twelve - two grey, two silver, two grey - Thirty - four grey, two silver - Twenty-one - one grey, one silver, for ten - Two silver, thirty- four grey, one silver, one grey for ten - two grey, two silver, two grey, thirteen.

Repeat line twice more.

MARIE Two.
 JEAN Two.

This then repeats through 'Three' and 'Four' . At the end of the line after 'Four', all in the group say 'Tally' and the pattern starts again at 'One.'

GROUP 2: CATHERINE, BERTRANDE, GUY.

BERTRANDE One.
 GUY One.
 CATHERINE ***as for Group 1, said as one continuous line with gaps for Bertrande's counting of the threads*** Blue, ten, five blue, five pink, five, five pink, five blue, ten, one pink - Ten - five blue, five pink, five, five pink, five blue, ten, one pink - Ten - five blue, five pink, five, five pink, five blue, ten -

Repeat line twice more.

BERTRANDE Two.
 GUY Two.

As for Group 1, the lines are repeated through 'Three' and 'Four', at the end of which all say 'Tally' and return to 'One' again.

GROUP 3: THE REST OF THE GIRLS

Group 3 recite the same lines introducing their position and what they must do as on Page 3, as follows:

YVETTE The cocoon boiler. The start of the pattern. Stir the pot.
JEANNE Fish out the cocoons.
THERESE Fetch more.
ANNE Fetch wood.
YVETTE Don't stop.
JEANNE The unwinder.
THERESE Find the thread-ends.
JEANNE Almost too fine to see.
ANNE Pass them to us.
YVETTE & JEANNE Don't stop.
THERESE AND ANNE The reelers.
THERESE Twist the threads together.
ANNE Put the reels in the dye vat.
THERESE Take them out.
JEANNE Hang them up to dry.
YVETTE, JEANNE, THERESE & ANNE Don't stop.

Establish the rhythms of these patterns, interweaving the countings of the three groups. Then Catherine goes to pick up her baby again, Group 2 stops work briefly but Groups 1 & 3 continue their pattern speech as background to the following furtive conversation.

BERTRANDE *furtive, vehement* Have you told her yet?
GUY What?
BERTRANDE Catherine! Does she know Denise is coming to take the baby today?
GUY It would just make it harder for her, knowing.
BERTRANDE She doesn't know?
GUY A quick, clean break. Less to get upset about.
BERTRANDE She doesn't know they're moving to Paris?
GUY You keep your nose out of it.
BERTRANDE Taking her baby to Paris...
GUY You know it's impossible to keep a child here.
BERTRANDE Guy, that's cruel! To give her baby away -
GUY You know Denise can't have children. She'll have the best of care.

Catherine returns to the loom.

BERTRANDE *hissed, vehement* You'd have kept a son!
GUY That's enough!...

EXTRACT TWO

JEANNE *to Anne and Therese* Berthe! Monsieur Guy must have sent for her. To replace Marie?
ANNE *shortly* How should I know?
JEANNE Marie was coughing most of last night.
JEAN Only another week to work, then she's out of here. [*He smiles to himself.*] We're out of here.

The girls exchange 'What good will that do?' looks and continue their dialogue.

PIERRE-MARIE Berthe Lemoine.

Berthe bows a curtsey, looking round for Marie. She sees her and reacts - shocked by the change - the obvious signs of sickness. Marie comes over to kiss her. The dialogues all stop.

MARIE I'd hardly have recognised my little cousin. How you've grown! Do you still spend your time drawing flowers?

BERTHE When I can.

MARIE Perhaps Madame will show you how to turn them into patterns.

GUY Yvette will show you what to do.

THERESE *kissing her* Cousin Berthe.

JEANNE *kissing her* Welcome to Lyons.

YVETTE How's all my family?

GUY Your village news can wait. What's happening in the country, Pierre-Marie?

PIERRE-MARIE *laying out his tray as he speaks* Ladies, I've all sorts of things to tempt you: printed kerchiefs from India... painted beads and glass bangles ... take a look.

Reactions from the girls, they hold up the beads and try the shawls against themselves. Marie's shawl - the one from the opening - is now in his pack.

YVETTE It's so pretty.

CECILE More show than sense.

PIERRE-MARIE *to Guy* More and more unstable. Some aristocrats are blowing with the wind, co-operating with the local assemblies...

ANNE Leopards trying to change their spots.

THERESE Would this suit me?

CECILE Don't waste your money. What would Louis say?

THERESE He'd say it suited me. How much is it, Pierre-Marie?

PIERRE-MARIE That one? Five francs.

Therese puts it back hastily.

CECILE Five francs!

PIERRE-MARIE The temper in Paris is nasty.

Marie pulls 'her' shawl out of the pack - elaborate, embroidered.

MARIE How much is this one?

GUY *impatient* He told you, five francs. [*To Pierre-Marie.*] Bread short again?

PIERRE-MARIE Worse than ever. The rain ruined this year's harvest too.

ANNE But it's not the aristocrats who go hungry.

CECILE Give it a rest, will you?

MARIE This one.

Pierre-Marie turns and considers Marie.

PIERRE-MARIE Fifteen francs.

Reaction from the girls - this is over a month's wages.

MARIE I want to buy it.

GUY Fifteen francs!

CECILE Don't be stupid.

MARIE Monsieur Guy will give you the money.

GUY Fifteen francs, for trumpery like that!
MARIE It's my money. I want to buy this one.

Guy goes into the house.

CECILE You're crazy.
ANNE It's an aristo's shawl.
THERESE Not for girls like us.
BERTHE ***softly*** It's beautiful. Look at the way the leaves curl around the stems, and
 the shadings of the flowers.

Guy returns with money which he puts into Pierre-Marie's hand.

GUY And that'll do. Get back to work.

EXTRACT THREE

The modern girls return, still looking about. The silkworker girls return to the shadows, whispering their lines which follow.

THERESE We work here.
ANNE We eat here.
JEANNE Bread. Soup.
YVETTE We had meat yesterday.
ANNE We sleep here.
ELLIE But why did they need their own hospital?
CECILE In corners.
MARIE On the benches.
SHARON I don't believe this!
YVETTE Under the looms.
JEAN In the master's kitchen.
ELLIE What?
THERESE In the heat.
ANNE And the steam.
BERTHE It's so hard to breathe.
THERESE Floating flecks of silk thread.
SHARON ***reading*** The silk factories had appalling mortality rates. One position could
 be filled in two or three years by three or four girls, often related,
 who simply stepped in when their predecessor died...
MANDY What did they die of?
SHARON TB. From the conditions they worked in.
THERESE We're not the worst. Stay with us.
SHARON Each factory sort of adopted one village and got all its girls from
 there. As one died the master just sent for the next sister down.
MARIE You'll see the children in the carpet factory.
ANNE Deformed from crouching at their looms.
YVETTE Darting beneath the press that won't stop for flesh or bones.
ELLIE Three or four girls in two or three years - that gives each girl
 about eight months!
MANDY Eight months!
CECILE You'll see the hands of the flower girls.
ANNE Fingerless from poisons that keep the blooms pretty.
JEAN You'll see the seamstresses sewing themselves blind in dim attics.
MARIE You'll see the mine children, screwing their eyes against the
 daylight.
ELLIE Let me get this straight. You worked until you died, then

your sister
 MANDY got your notebook with what you'd earned - until she died -
 SHARON A tontine.
 MANDY What?
 ELLIE A tontine. The last survivor gets the money.
 MANDY That's awful.
 SHARON So the shawls - these boots - they came to this hospital, gave in
 ELLIE their outdoor clothes...
 SHARON They didn't need them any more.
 ELLIE It's like the *Titanic*.
 SHARON The *Titanic*?
 ELLIE Yeah. When they dived down in a submarine, there were
 no bodies - just pairs of shoes on the seabed. Leather
 lasts longer than bodies.
 MANDY I didn't need to know that.
 ELLIE Or like the piles of shoes at Auschwitz.... Do you suppose
 the girls who wore these knew they were going to die?
 SHARON They must have known.
 MANDY But why? Why did they do it? Wouldn't it be better to live,
 however poor you'd be?

The ghosts come in to surround her, whispering.

ANNE Have you ever been poor?
 JEANNE How would you know how it feels?
 YVETTE Back aching, hands shredded from digging, planting, harvesting.
 SHARON I suppose they didn't have much choice.
 ANNE Always working.
 JEANNE Unpaid.
 ALL No dowry.
 SHARON If they didn't have a dowry, they couldn't get married.
 THERESE See Louis marry someone else.
 MANDY So what did you do?
 SHARON Lived with your parents till they died...

EXTRACT FOUR

GUY Cecile, you'll take over from Marie. This evening, you'd better
 teach Anne your work.

***Anne stands up reluctantly. Cecile nods and pats the seat beside her. As
 Anne begins to move Marie rises, barring the way.***

MARIE I'm not that ill. I can keep working.
 GUY The nuns will take care of you.
 MARIE You said a month. There's one more week to go!
 GUY Berthe is here now.
 MARIE You said -
 GUY I have the others to consider.
 MARIE They'd let me stay.

Guy looks around. Nobody meets his eyes.

GUY Well - Anne?

Silence. Anne looks at the floor and goes past Marie to sit by Cecile.

MARIE *bitterly* Vive la Revolution!

GUY Give me your notebook to mark up. [*Defiantly Marie draws it from her pocket and thrusts it at him. He writes, then looks up.*] That shawl was fifteen francs. [*He writes again and returns the book.*] Jean, go with her.

Jean nods. A long silence. Marie looks slowly round but nobody will meet her eyes. Jean goes to her corner, picks up her shawl and brings it to put around her shoulders.

JEAN *very gently* It's time you rested.

Marie opens out the notebook, looking at what Guy has written.

MARIE So close...

She hands it to Berthe, looking in her face for a long moment, almost as if wondering if she deserves this prize her family has died for - then she puts up one hand to touch her on the cheek.

MARIE You're nearly there.

Jean puts an arm round her and begins to lead her off. At the doorway she pauses, takes a deep breath, shoulders squared, trying for a final leavetaking - but can think of nothing. Then a last look at Guy, standing immobile - a sudden smile. She'll beat him yet.

MARIE Berthe, come with me, little cousin. [*Defiantly, at Guy.*] Jean will see you home. [*To Jean.*] You'll look after her?

Berthe hesitates, looking at Guy. Catherine moves forward.

CATHERINE On you go.

Berthe moves across to them and they exit.

GUY She's indentured for a year.
CATHERINE That gives them time to find a workshop. [*Hard - it's an order.*]
Gives you time to find the money.

She turns on her heel and walks out. After a pause, Guy follows.

ANNE The pattern is broken.
THERESE A new one begins.
ALL The silk girls...

EXTRACT FIVE

SHARON Vive la Revolution. Fancy clothes became dangerous - look like an aristocrat, you were liable to be hauled off to the guillotine.
MANDY But I thought it was the workers who rose up. Didn't they make conditions better for their own people?
SHARON They killed off the people who bought the silk, the people who owed the factories money. The industry collapsed.
ELLIE They killed off the nuns. Nobody to nurse them.
MANDY And these girls went back to poverty.
ELLIE For a bit, until the Revolution put them at war with the rest of Europe and
all they had to bring money in was exports.

SHARON Silk?
 ELLIE Just like governments in developing countries today. It's what my
 mum says, when she insists on buying Fair Trade stuff. The cheaper it's
 produced, the more the Government makes. So they keep the
 wages at peanuts. Deliberately. As long as the West keeps buying...
 MANDY **horrified** Girls like us still work in conditions like that?
 SHARON Fifteen years for a dowry?
 ELLIE Who made your trainers?
 SHARON Where's your coffee from?
 MANDY I never thought - [***She holds her bag out in front of her, staring at it.***]
 I imagined native workers, laughing together in the sunshine. Like the
 adverts.
 ELLIE More likely nine year olds who never see daylight. Too busy
 burning themselves on molten glass for a penny a kilo of
 beads.
 SHARON My little sister's nine.
 MANDY Girls like us...
 ELLIE Have you written enough?
 SHARON Several essays' worth.
 MANDY **reading the label beside Berthe.** Look - some of them did make it.
 See?
 SHARON What?
 MANDY **reading** One of the best-known designers of the post-Revolutionary
 period was Berthe Lemaire, who began as a weaver in the Morisot
 factory in Lyons. With her husband, Jean, she took over the Hotel Dieu
 and built up a thriving business, specialising in the newly fashionable
 painted muslins.
 ELLIE Not silk. She knew what it was like.
 MANDY **still reading** With state aid and help from their former mistress, Catherine
 Morisot, this became one of the earliest workers' co-operatives. Look, her
 dress is the same pattern as that shawl.

A pause. The girls look around slowly.

ELLIE I'm glad one of them escaped. I'm glad things changed.
 SHARON It shows things can be changed...

Ellie and Sharon exit, leaving Mandy alone. She looks once more at her bag and then hangs it with the shawls.

MANDY Things can be changed.

Mandy exit.

EXTRACT from Production Notes

from **NOTES ON THE SCRIPT AND PLAYING STYLE - PAGE BY PAGE**

PAGE 2

Apart from the rectangular screens- which should be quite tall - one on each side of the back of the stage, the rest of the weaving process is mimed.

Since the silk-workers are on from the start, shadowy towards the back of the stage, the first thing to do is to work out how these ought to be positioned. Working from centre back then: the central position is held by the cocoon boiler, Yvette, with the unwinder, Jeanne. On either side of them are Therese and Anne, the reelers. On either side of them are Cecile and Catherine, the pattern-readers. After them are Bertrande

and Marie, the draw-girls. And finally, beside each loom are the two men, Guy and Jean. If you look at it as a line from one side to the other then, starting with the back SR loom, there is:

Guy, Bertrande, Catherine, Anne, Jeanne and Yvette, Therese, Cecile, Marie, Jean.

Having established the positions, it will be essential to practise the mime routine so that the movements and the words build up a rhythm.

Thus: Yvette empties the cocoons into the big boiling vat and stirs

Jeanne dips a broad tool into the vat and fishes out the cocoons. Then she teases out the ends of thread from the cocoons. Perhaps she could be positioned sitting in front of the 'vat', so that she can pass her threads to each side - to Therese and Anne.

Therese and Anne, the reelers, twist the threads together then dip them into pots of different colour dye, pull them out again and hang them up to dry.

The pattern readers, Cecile and Catherine call out the colours and the number of the threads that make up the pattern. This will vary all the time. Think of the kind of patterns that might be on a silk shawl covered with intricate flowers, birds and leaves, for instance, all in bright colours.

Then Marie and Bertrande, the draw-girls raise up the part of the loom which lifts the warp threads [those that run up and down the loom]. This will allow the weft-threads [those that go across the loom] to weave in and out of the vertical warps. They count out the right number of each colour thread, according to the numbers called out by the pattern-readers, and thread them into the spindle.

Finally the men 'throw' the heavy spindle from one side to the other so that the weft threads attached to that spindle are woven in and out of the warp threads. This 'throwing' will require accuracy and precision to feed the shuttle precisely between the warps.

Work out a series of movements that best mimes what each of your characters' tasks may be. These will have to be clarified and made very large and precise. Don't go for naturalistic accuracy, more for a largely sketched impression. You should end up with pared down moves that can be blended together into a rhythm. The rhythm of the movements and the words they speak act together to form a chorus behind much of the action, fading to a murmur or coming up to loud as required, but always constant.

I suggest you practise all this first, before starting work on the script. Practise them until the moves, at least, become automatic.

All the 'shadow girls' - the silk-workers - come on as the lights on the back half of the stage dim.

I wonder if it would look better if the modern and ancient scenes are at different paces - the shadow girls moving like ghosts in slow motion. Try this out....