

Dialectics of the Heart

A play in two acts

by

Dale Griffiths Stamos

[EXCERPT]

LIGHTS UP on ELIZABETH standing at her lectern:

ELIZABETH

When it came to knowledge, Plato had what you might call a healthy distrust of the senses. They were, in his estimation, unreliable at best and the world that they perceived was one that was in a constant state of flux. Plato was after the real thing, Truth with a capital T, that reality that transcends the world, that is, in fact, unchanging and eternal. It was in search of that truth that he devised his famous diagram of the divided line...

(Lights fade on ELIZABETH and come up on RICHARD, in front of his discussion group.)

RICHARD

Okay. Yeah. Plato's divided line. Reason at the top. Then mathematical and scientific understanding, then belief and perception and bringing up the rear, conjecture and imagination. Hah. I don't think Shakespeare and Picasso would be too happy being relegated to the lowest rung of knowledge, but there you are. Plato argues there's only one real way to truth and that's through reason. All the other levels are inferior in some way. Okay, good grist for discussion. What do you all think? Do you need to shut out this world and seep yourself in pure thought to find truth? Or is it possible to find it in something else? What about...a kick-ass sunset? ...a blues riff by B.B. King? ...the mystery of a subatomic particle? The question is: Does truth just happen here?:

(points to head)

Or could it also happen here?

(points to eyes)

Or... here?

(points to heart)

Or even here?

(points to genitals. Hands of "students" shoot up)

Okay, okay! I see you all have something to say. Hold on, I'm still getting your names straight...

(refers to class roster)

Let's start with... Daryl, is it? Go ahead.

[BLACKOUT]

Lights come up on Faculty Lounge. Offstage, we hear the sounds of a party. ELIZABETH stands there alone, drinking a soda. PHILIP, somewhat inebriated, comes in from the direction of the party, a bottle of Scotch and a glass in hand.

PHILIP

And what are you doing in here? Hiding out?

ELIZABETH

You might say so, yes.

PHILIP

Well, how 'bout a drink then? Might loosen you up.

ELIZABETH

No thanks.

PHILIP

Party pooper.

ELIZABETH

That's me.

PHILIP

Well, Ms. Pooper. Let me be the first to congratulate you on your newest article in The Philosophical Review.

ELIZABETH

Thank you.

PHILIP

And with a subject like epiphenomenalism! Brava! Reviving a dead-as-doornail theory like that and making it almost sound plausible!

(He downs his glass, pours
another)

ELIZABETH

Philip, maybe you should put that bottle away.

PHILIP

Why? It's my only comfort these days. Oh, but then of course, there's Dora, isn't there? Who daily invents new means to punish me.

ELIZABETH

You know, maybe I should be getting back to the party...

PHILIP

No, no, don't rush out on my account. That is, unless perhaps you're feeling, oh I don't know... a little guilty?

ELIZABETH

Why should I feel guilty?

PHILIP

No reason. I'm sure it's every day you testify in front of Tenure and Privileges.

ELIZABETH

That was supposed to be confidential.

PHILIP

Well, the walls have ears, as they say.

ELIZABETH

Or some of our colleagues have big mouths.

PHILIP

Same difference.

ELIZABETH

What would you have had me do, Philip? Lie?

PHILIP

Well, you certainly could have been a little less... forthcoming. The committee would have never sanctioned me based solely on the complaint filed by little Jeremy what's-his-name.

ELIZABETH

Baxter. And he caught you kissing Annie in a supplies closet! Philip, what were you thinking?!

PHILIP

So I acted a bit foolishly. Five weeks more and she wouldn't have been my student. You knew that! You could have claimed ignorance. Other faculty did!

ELIZABETH

Philip. You know I didn't approve of what you were doing, to yourself, or to Dora, but even so, I never would have independently volunteered information. But this is different. The committee asked me an unequivocal question. I answered them honestly.

PHILIP

Well, forgive me for being under the impression that we were... if not exactly friends, at least friendly!

ELIZABETH

This has nothing to do with friendliness! This has to do with a choice I made not to compound your error by committing one of my own!

PHILIP

So you help feed their little witch hunt.

ELIZABETH

It wasn't a witch hunt. You were in violation of the Faculty Code!

PHILIP

The revised Faculty Code. A direct result of rampant paranoia.

You know damn well five years ago the committee wouldn't have even entertained a complaint like this! Not with consenting adults! But throw in a few little sexual harassment suits and suddenly any kind of contact is taboo!

ELIZABETH

Well, there are some of us who believe it always should have been that way!

PHILIP

Oh please! I hate when you get up on one of your ethical high horses. This sort of thing has been going on since Socrates dallied with his first young man. Besides, you really think it's something you can regulate? You bring minds together, sometimes bodies follow.

ELIZABETH

That's right, weak bodies.

(PHILIP groans)

It's what I think! What you're talking about is a direct violation of a student's rights, consenting, or not. There is an unequal power structure here, Philip, we have control over these kids' futures! You tell me you can sleep with someone and still be objective about her work? Come on! You're either going to be overly lenient or overly tough, to compensate. And either way, you're no longer giving that student the one thing she has a right to expect from you: a dispassionate evaluation. And we're not even speaking here of how unfair it would be to the other students! No, I'm sorry. It's wrong, professionally and morally. No amount of rationalizing will change that.

PHILIP

(beat)

Well, gee, Elizabeth. Don't mince words on my account.

ELIZABETH

There didn't seem any point expressing this to you before... I mean, while you were in the throes of it.

PHILIP

(remembering)

Yes, right, in the throes...

(Beat)

Well, thank you for clarifying your position on this. I suppose you quite enjoyed seeing me raked over the coals. Fair retribution and all that.

ELIZABETH

No, Philip, I did not.

PHILIP

Well, it could have been worse. They could have dismissed me, did you know that?

Apparently they were two votes away from doing just that. But instead, they left me with one blessed graduate seminar and the rest of the time I get to teach Intro to Philosophy classes to freshman every other morning at 8:00 AM!

ELIZABETH

I'm sure it's only temporary.

PHILIP

Probationary. For two years.

ELIZABETH

Ah.

PHILIP

You know, I believe they quite enjoyed slapping my wrist. What is that particular pleasure people take in feeling themselves superior? Even when they may have been guilty of similar misdemeanors in the past?

ELIZABETH

Well, like you said, things are different now.

PHILIP

Yes, so they are. That moral compass needle has been set just this side of impossible. Perfect for paragons like yourself.

ELIZABETH

I'm not a paragon.

PHILIP

Well! You could have fooled me.

[BLACKOUT]

A spot comes up on RICHARD, in his classroom.

RICHARD

All right, who we looking at today? Ah yes: René Descartes, otherwise known as His Royal Prince of Skepticism. "I'm not going to believe anything, you got it! till I prove it to myself first!" So he starts with the most obvious: Cogito, ergo sum. I think, therefore I am. If I'm thinking this thought, I must exist, right? From here, he jumps directly into trying to prove that God exists. And he tackles this proof in the same way as he did the cogito, logically... con la razón! Well, as you can imagine, that stirred up a little controversy! Not the least of which was from another 17th century philosopher, Blaise Pascal, who felt that trying to use the mind to prove God was absurd. He insisted the only way to know God was through a much different organ. The heart, he said, has its reasons reason knows nothing of. To know the unknowable, you've got to feel it. Hey, look at Zen Buddhism while you're at it.

It makes an even more radical claim: that reason actually screws you up when you're searching for the infinite. It says you can only get there through irrationality, intuition, paradox. Sound of one hand clapping, you know the rap. Okay... So reason, the way? Or in the way? What do you all think? No, let's make this personal. Any of you been searching for God lately? Are you just accepting it on faith or do some of you want proof, something that makes sense to your head? How 'bout those of you just looking for... transcendence, or... bliss, whatever name you got for it... how have you tried to get it? The easy way, through drugs? Or maybe, through that group high called a rock concert, or how about that moment in sex when you're you and not you all at the same time! What I'm telling you, people, is these questions have been around for a long time, and you still are asking them... So, ándele, talk to me!

[BLACKOUT]

Lights up on RICHARD's office. He's sitting behind his desk reading student papers. ELIZABETH enters.

RICHARD

Well! Hello, Professor!

(He clears off a chair piled
with books)

Uh... sorry... Here, sit, sit down!

(ELIZABETH sits)

I'm almost finished with these papers. If you were wondering...

ELIZABETH

No, that's all right. You still have time. Actually, I stopped by to--.

RICHARD

Oh, God. Where are my manners! Can I offer you something to drink? I always keep some juice in my drawer here.

(He opens a drawer, pulls out
some juice)

Or... how about...

(He opens up another drawer)

...a bagel?!

(He slaps a bag of bagels on
the desk)

ELIZABETH

No, nothing. Really.

(A beat)

Look, Richard. I need to discuss something with you.

RICHARD

Great. Shoot.

ELIZABETH

Well, it has to do with... your discussion group. A number of your students have been asking--

RICHARD

They're a great bunch, aren't they?

ELIZABETH

Yes, of course, but--

RICHARD

I mean, except for a few who are neurotically obsessed with their grades... I saw you were there the day Boyd Rivers said he had to get an A in this class just to keep up his 4.0.

ELIZABETH

Yes, what's wrong with that?

RICHARD

Well, it's wrong if that's his only motivation. That boy hasn't an ounce of the philosophical seeker in him. Even if he can quote Plato verbatim.

ELIZABETH

But if he learns the material, what does it matter? We judge his academic performance, not his inner urgings.

RICHARD

Yes, but it just seems to me, in the real pursuit of truth--!

ELIZABETH

In a college, that pursuit is institutionalized and as such--

RICHARD

As such, it's the last place where a student can look for it, before being assaulted by the pragmatism of the real world.

ELIZABETH

Maybe so, but at the same time, that student must be prepared to enter into that real world, a world run by competition and stringent hierarchical structures.

RICHARD

Whoa, that's good.

ELIZABETH

Excuse me?

RICHARD

"Stringent hierarchical structures." I like that.

ELIZABETH

Well, good. Then maybe you might consider respecting some of those structures in the way you handle your discussion groups.

RICHARD

What?

ELIZABETH

Richard. Look. You came here with a reputation for two things. Brilliance and iconoclasm. While some leeway can be allowed in the latter for the sake of the former, as both the professor of this course and as your advisor, I would ask you to rein things in.

RICHARD

What things are you talking about?

ELIZABETH

Oh, comparing Blaise Pascal to the Tao te Ching...

RICHARD

That was Zen Buddhism, Taoism was Plato.

ELIZABETH

Or equating drug use with a search for the transcendent!

RICHARD

Well that's what it is, distorted though it may be.

ELIZABETH

And then there's your rather frequent tendency to appeal to the more... romantic, not to speak of... sexual urgings of the students.

RICHARD

But that's because that's practically all they think about! Why not show them even those things connect to philosophy. That ultimately everything connects.

ELIZABETH

That's a fine intention. But I'm not sure the way you're choosing to do go about it is---

RICHARD

Look, if I'm going to get to these kids, I need to do it on their own turf!

ELIZABETH

Which just strikes me as you dropping down to their level, rather than expecting them to rise to yours.

RICHARD

I'm still giving them all the material from the course, I'm just throwing in a little extra!

ELIZABETH

Yes, well, it's that extra I'm worried about! ...Look. There has to be a consistency in the material presented in each group, otherwise, when tests roll around... well, you understand.

(RICHARD is silent.)

ELIZABETH (CONT'D)

I know you must feel I'm restraining you terribly...

RICHARD

It's not that, it's... just... well, I'm used to this from the college I came from. But here, working with you... I thought...

ELIZABETH

What?

(RICHARD is silent)

What?

RICHARD

Forgive me. But... this just isn't the Elizabeth Drewer I expected.

ELIZABETH

Excuse me?

RICHARD

What I'm saying is... when I read your work... there is something in your work...

ELIZABETH

Yes?

RICHARD

Well, it's this... passion. I mean, it's just so clear how much pleasure you take in it! And that's always made me feel like, well...if you strip away our different approach to the subject, our different cultures, I've felt like, underneath it all, we were...

ELIZABETH

What?

RICHARD

...Kindred spirits.

ELIZABETH

...Ah.

RICHARD

Sometimes you can't help but form a picture of a person whose work you admire.

ELIZABETH

Yes, I see.

(beat)

Well, I'm sorry to have disappointed you.

RICHARD

I didn't say that.

ELIZABETH

(beat)

No. Well, ...look, Richard. Naturally, I'm flattered that you felt a connection to my work. One always hopes for that kind of... kinship with a reader.

RICHARD

Yes, I imagine!

ELIZABETH

But... let's not let that confuse things. It still comes down to the fact that you're... inexperienced in this world of academia! Believe me, passion... is not the only thing you're going to need to survive in it. That passion has to be appropriately contained.

RICHARD

Has yours?

ELIZABETH

What?

RICHARD

Has yours been appropriately contained?

ELIZABETH

(beat)

Richard, you have this disconcerting habit of... turning everything back on a person. I do wish you'd take this conversation seriously.

RICHARD

Oh, I do. Very.

ELIZABETH

Well, good. In that case, ...I would just ask you to think about everything I've said, all right? We'll talk again.

RICHARD

Sure. Anytime. When?

ELIZABETH
I'll... have to let you know.

[BLACKOUT]