



Episode 46

So Is Teeny Todd Really Sweeney's Little Brother?

For some people, forensics never ends. And -- with all due apologies to Stephen Sondheim -- for Disney Davidson, some people is him.

Disney graduated from Nighten Day High School last June, capping a four-year career as a Lincoln-Douglas debater. In those years he only once took a first-place trophy, at the junior varsity level; once or twice he almost made it into varsity finals, losing in two-one decisions in semis; as often as not, he didn't even break, so while his friends and colleagues and competitors were continuing on in the elimination rounds, fifty percent of the time he had changed into his civvies and was an innocent bystander in the taking of forensic tin.

So Disney Davidson was never a Master of the Debate Universe, but that didn't that mean Disney wasn't a debater. Disney Davidson was in the Life. The Life was Disney. Disney defined himself as an LDer first, a human being second, and a high school student somewhere around a dim twenty-seventh.

Four years of LD. And then it ended, with a snap of the fingers.

And Disney wasn't a debater anymore.

Sure, there is college-level debate at Northeastern Agricultural Institute, the state facility at which Disney matriculated, but at Naggie, as the college is called, nobody takes debate seriously, and the thin gruel that passes for the real thing is inedible to a connoisseur such as Disney.

But still, for Disney, forensics never ends. He has severed none of his ties with the high school debate community, although many of those ties have moved on and severed him. In addition to his complex personal e-mail network of old- and new-timers, he maintains his link to the Life via the LD-listserver, the electronic monster that connects the most rabid of the Lincoln-Douglas breed, or at least the most rabid with access to a personal computer, with a stream of never-ending communication. While the LD-1 was publicly discussing the possibility of animal-testing as the new topic, Disney's personal network was analyzing the demise of Seth B. Obomash, the love-life of Had Fleece, and the partnership of William Hand and David Brillig. And to maintain a personal connection to the Life, Disney does the one thing that every college freshman who formerly debated and still doesn't have a significant other does-- he judges.

It feels eerie for Disney to be boarding a school bus again after a month at Naggie. And since this is a Northeastern Debate League tournament, for novices and junior varsity only, he feels a little like he did when he first started out four years ago, surrounded mostly by strangers on their way to nowhere. It is raining hard against the windows of the bus as he settles into his seat. There are Speechies here, many of them upperclassmen with whom he traveled quite a bit during his own career, but the general relation of Speechies and Debaters to a school bus is comparable to the Sharks and the Jets at the high school dance -- with further apologies to Stephen Sondheim -- that is, the bus is neutral territory, and no one crosses the boundaries for fear of ostracism.

It is Tarnish Jutmoll to whom Disney turns for companionship as the door to the bus whooshes shut and the lumbering beast pulls away from Old Yeller high school.

"Who are all these people?" Disney asks.

On the big bus, Disney and Jutmoll are right up front behind the driver, while the forensicians are grouped by activity in the back of the bus, separated from their elders by half a dozen rows of empty seats.

"We've got four newbie LDers," Jutmoll explains.

"Any good ones?"

Jutmoll nods. "At least one." He inclines his head toward the assembled kids. "The Japanese girl, Camelia Maru. She won the Little Johnson."

"Jasmine's sister?"

"Yep."

"A chip off the old sushi. How's Jasmine been doing?"

"Breaking. But not happy. Something's up with her. School work, maybe. But I think she'll have a good year."

Disney looks over the group. "Are the two little lawyers yours?"

"The Tarleton twins. Very strange. They spend all their time figuring out if it's possible for Klingons to mate with Changelings."

Disney cringes.

"But the one I really wonder about is that one," Jutmoll says.

"The geeky one in the red cap."

"Hamlet P. Buglaroni. He's on a different planet. Literally."

"All he needs is a Changeling to go out with," Disney says.

"If he lasts another month, it would be a miracle. I don't even know why he's in the activity."

"Expand his horizons?"

"They could use it."

Their conversation is companionable. From Jutmoll's perspective, Disney is that much-needed asset, an available LD judge, or at least available if Jutmoll pays him fifty dollars a day. And from Disney's perspective, Jutmoll is his conduit to the Life.

It is a symbiosis often repeated in the debate animal kingdom.

The bus is only going as far as Toulouse, which is less than half an hour away, even in a driving rainstorm. The heat has come up, and Disney takes off his jacket, on the right arm of which is a patch that reads "Wool is Rape." Now Jutmoll can see his tee shirt, on which is drawn a picture of a farmer with a gun to a cow's head over the legend "Got Milk?"

"I should have told you the new topic beforehand," Jutmoll muses, although he doesn't believe Disney would have bothered adjusting his attire.

"What is it?" Disney asks.

"Resolved: that animal testing is immoral."

Disney whistles softly.

"Next time," Jutmoll says, "why don't you just wear your 'Animal Testing is Immoral' shirt?"

"I can be very neutral," Disney states, lifting his chin. "I can listen to both sides, and judge an objective winner."

"But will the kids looking at your tee shirt realize that?"

Disney shrugs. "Maybe not. Maybe I should keep my jacket on."

"The wool patch isn't quite as bad. Marginally."

"Marginally," Disney agrees. He looks to the back of the bus again. "Same old Speechies as always, I see. Except for Cartier. What happened to her? She finally marry Donald Trump?"

"She's still with us. She doesn't 'do' buses if she can help it, she told me, so she'll be getting to Toulouse on her own steam."

"The Miata?"

"That or Daddy's Porsche."

"I thought Daddy had a Mercedes."

"It's a Porsche now."

"It's so hard to keep up."

"Ain't it the truth."

"I see William and David are still with us," Disney says. "I hear they've been having a little falling out."

"They won the Messerschmitt," Jutmoll says with more than a little pride. "Except for some reason now they're no longer talking to each other, and they're both breaking in new solo pieces."

"It's hard to imagine those two not together. They were always more like..." He notices the Tarleton brothers. "They were always more like twins than the real thing."

"Even twins quarrel."

"Yeah, but not those two." He surveys the group again. "Kumar and Ashley and Mark and Noah haven't changed much."

"Ashley's a senior, so it's her last season out."

"That phony smile hasn't disappeared since last year, I see."

"That's oratorical poise, Mr. Davidson," Jutmoll says, theatrically stroking his white goatee.

Disney laughs. When he was part of the team Jutmoll never gave him a hint that any of its members were less than perfect, but the old coach is obviously sharing a little of his true feelings with Disney now that Disney has been through it all and come out the other end. Disney enjoys the feeling of specialness and entitlement that comes with having been a survivor, and sitting around schmoozing with the other survivors.

"I assume the others are the new Speechies," Disney asks.

"Untried and untrue," Jutmoll says. "This is their maiden voyage. How many of them survive remains to be seen. But at least all my LDers survived the Little Johnson, and that in itself is unusual. Maybe our retention rate is going up."

"The year I was a freshman we had eleven LDers at the start-up meeting, seven at the Little Johnson, and four at the Toulouse NDJ. By the time I graduated it was only me."

"Forensic attrition. It hits the best of teams. School work, other interests, the bloom off the debate rose. There are a lot of reasons. I hate to see people give it up, but everyone follows their own muse."

The bus is now pulling into the Toulouse parking lot. Two other buses are pulled up in front of the main entrance, the students hustling through the rain into the building. It is times like this that the advantages of being anything in forensics other than a politician become readily apparent. While the Speechies and LDers zip out of the buses into the school with the least amount of precipitation damage, the policy debaters must haggle with their tubs, off-loading them from the bus, stacking them onto dollies, manhandling them up the stairs and through the heavy glass doors that refuse to stay open, all of this in pouring rain, compounded by that fact that these are all novices and junior varsity politicians, lacking the necessary experience to perform their teamster chores efficiently. More than one tub falls, and more than one carefully arranged folder of evidence goes splashing into a puddle as large as the Aral sea.

When the Nighten Day bus stops, its participants are lucky enough to only have to maneuver themselves, which they do with little ado. Disney puts his jacket back on and then hesitates as he prepares to reenter the arena. To reenter the Life.

"It hasn't changed in the couple of months you've been gone," Jutmoll says, standing behind him in the aisle of the bus. "Same old activity, a lot of the same old people."

"It feels different now."

"It won't once you start sitting around in the cafeteria waiting for the schematics to come out."

"I guess we're on separate schedules today?"

"Yes. I'll sign everybody up, then I'm either off with the Catholic Speechies or in the tab room, and you're in charge of the heathen debaters."

"Anything I should know rule-wise?"

"Same house rules as always. Nobody leaves the building under any circumstances. But keep an extra eye on Buglaroni. There's something about him that rubs me the wrong way."

"Has he done anything yet?"

"He showed up at the Little Johnson with cases on the wrong topic And he hasn't got a clue to what we're talking about in our meetings."

"He won't be the first one who hasn't got a clue."

"But there's an attitude... I don't know. There's one in every crowd, and ours, I guess, is going to be Buglaroni. Are you ready to prepare a face to meet the faces you will meet, my friend?"

"Onward and upward," Disney says, going down the steps of the bus.

"And into the woods," Jutmoll says behind him. With, for the last time, apologies to Mr. Sondheim.

Will Disney Davidson find a real life in college?

Will Disney break down and eat cold cuts for lunch?

Will Buglaroni surprise everyone and win the NDL?

Shouldn't Sondheim apologize to us for "Assassins"?

Is this how Nostrum Party Headquarters celebrates the coming of Spring?

The answer will not be hidden in the bottom of a bottle of Perrier Jouet, nor can it be found in our next episode: "Hong Kong Chicken Flu: Colonel Sanders's Private Chinese MFN or Tyson Meets Ebola at the E-coli corral."