



Episode 87

Not That Infernal Nonsense Pinafore!

The basement of David Brillig's house is turned over to the purpose of family room. It is the site of the Brillig stereo, the Brillig television, the Brillig game library (a small set of musty boxes handed down from generations past, including Monopoly, Sorry and Clue, plus a more contemporary box of Trivial Pursuit, circa 1980). The basement is also the site of David's drama library, a three-shelf collection he has been diligently putting together since freshman year. The collection comprises thin volumes of single plays, bulkier play collections, treatises giving acting advice, forensics textbooks, and finally the Playbills David has been squirreling away since his first exposure to the stage at the age of four, when he and William, already best friends in preschool, went with their small group of marginally well-behaved classmates to a dinner-theater matinee of "La Cage aux Folles." It was probably not the perfect maiden choice for the recently undiapered set, and in hindsight who knew what effect it must have had on William's sexual orientation, but from that moment both David and William had become unshakable albeit young enthusiasts of everything theatrical. The Brillig family room has also for the last three years been William's and David's private stage, where they decided their choices for pieces to perform, worked out the cuttings, and practiced them and practiced them and practiced them again until they were better than perfect. And then practiced them and practiced them and practiced them some more.

There are some truisms about forensics, or almost any activity for that matter, school or otherwise, that boil down to roughly one idea: The activity that I do is difficult and time-consuming, while the activity that you do is simple and you never have to work at it. Policians believe that this is true of LDers and Speechies, LDers believe it of Policians

and Speechies, and Speechies believe it of Policicians and LDers. To a degree that are all correct, while at the same time they are all mistaken. Any activity, from forensics to fly-fishing, has its share of pikers. There are always the dilettantes, the marginally curious merely along for the ride, and the goldbricks who are hiding behind the activity to shirk something more serious, like marriage or mowing the lawn. These are the ones who do little or no work, who show up irregularly, and who do not succeed particularly well. Depending on whether it's forensics or fly-fishing, they win no trophies, or they catch no trout. The pikers, sad as it may be to say, might in many situations be the majority. Neither forensics nor fly-fishing are, after all, life-and-death activities. The world will not end if you do not give your entire being over to them. You do not have to be the best. You do not even have to be good. Sometimes you only have to show up. If you don't want any trophies. Or trout.

But pikers notwithstanding, in all branches of forensics there are also the hard workers. And it does not matter if that hard work is in pursuit of Policy or LD or Speech, it is an equivalent hard work. It is not the same hard work -- researching the Tipper Gore disads is nothing like rehearsing an Amy Lowell poem -- but it is just as difficult. The self-congratulatory truisms ignore that similar level of difficulty, and claim that their work is harder. It isn't. It is only different. All smart people know this, but only wise people act upon this knowledge. And if you think wisdom is the same as intelligence, then you are not wise yourself.

The work of the hard-working Speechie Interpreter (which is, again, quite different from that of, for instance, the Speechie Extemp) begins with the selection of the pieces. There are many possibilities, but which ones are right? The piece has to be right for the performers, which means reading and judging based on your own particular strengths and weaknesses. The piece has to be right for competition, which means knowing what judges like to hear and avoiding the same old same-olds; is there a Speech judge alive in America today who wants to hear "The Compleat Shakespeare" yet again at next week's tournament? And finally, a piece has to be the right length, which in Dramatic Interp and Duo means cutting. For David, this finding and creating the right piece has been a non-stop process. His ear is always to the theatrical ground, but realistically speaking, it has always been during the summer that he and William have had the time to winnow down their selections and, more importantly, cut and practice them. During the rest of the year, all that pesky school work always gets in the way.

Which does not leave David and his new partner Kumar a hell of a lot of time to get a piece ready for the Moly, which is now less than two weeks away.

"I don't even know if it's worth the trouble," Kumar says. He is stretched out on the Brillig family-room couch, his green fedora pulled down low on his forehead.

David is crouched in front of his bookshelves, scanning for likely prospects. "I don't want to just give up," he says. "I was psyched to go to the Moly."

"Another tournament more or less won't make a difference."

"Not just another tournament. Our last tournament. That would make a difference."

"Man, that sucks, you know. Running out of money like that. Dropping the team."

"Tell me about it." He is tapping his finger on one of his books. "You're not big on Tennessee Williams, Kumar, are you?"

"What would we do? Blanche and Stanley? The old lady and that girl from Menagerie? Doesn't sound right to me."

"I guess not." David runs his finger along the spines of the books, hoping that inspiration will run from their innards into his through the contact. "How was the college trip this weekend?" he asks.

"I sort of liked Bates," Kumar replies. "It's like Maine, you know? The middle of nowhere, and they wouldn't admit it but I guess it starts snowing on Halloween and continues through the Fourth of July, but I like the programs and I got a good feel for the people. Plus we got to stop at L.L.Bean on the way and buy some good stuff."

"Would you go for early admission?"

"I don't think so. But I'll definitely apply there. It might be one of my first choices."

"You're going to have more than one first choice?"

"I've already got two. Cornell's my other first choice."

"You went up there too?"

"Not yet. It's on the C tour. But it does have first choice written all over it. I'm thinking Johns Hopkins would also be another first choice, but since we're doing all the travelling and checking things out alphabetically, I may never get that far. Even Georgetown is borderline. Alphabetically, I mean, given the amount of time we have to travel. Sometimes I wonder, with Lav Bunbury running the advisers, if anyone from Nighten ever goes to any college higher than D."

"How about something Greek?"

"Too far to commute."

"I mean something Greek for our piece. I've got some parts of Orestes blocked out as possible."

"You're not going to believe this, David, but I can see the future, and Orestes wouldn't work for us."

David looks over at him. "You know your theater stuff, don't you?"

"I can hold my own." Kumar sits up. "You got any music we could put on? You got 'Billy Breathes?'"

"It's only my parents' stuff down here. Sixties rock. Folk music. Dazed and confused detritus, mostly."

"How about show tunes. I love 'Rent.'"

David's eyes narrow. "Not 'Rent,'" he says, a dark edge to his voice. He quickly shakes himself out of it. "The only shows my parents like are Gilbert and Sullivan."

Kumar shakes his head in understanding. "They stop growing at some point, parents. Like when they're about nineteen they buy their last album, and they listen to it for the rest of their lives. You must have some CDs of your own. Bring 'em down."

"Sullivan and Gilbert!"

"Not Gilbert and Sullivan, man. Phish. 'Sweeney Todd.' 'Reservoir Dogs.' Something we can actually listen to."

"Not Gilbert and Sullivan. Sullivan and Gilbert. It's a play about Gilbert and Sullivan. William and I had seriously considered doing it, and then we just forgot about it for some reason. I even did a tentative cutting."

"Is it funny?"

"Two cantankerous old farts. It would be perfect."

"I love doing old," Kumar says. "I do old really well."

David tosses him a copy of a Samuel French company acting script. "We can run through it now, then make some copies tomorrow and start polishing and practicing. We don't have much time until the Moly."

"Two whole weeks. And then Nighten Day Speech and Debate is history."

"It's not going to be history. Something will happen. I know it will."

Kumar shakes his head. "It's history, David. You might as well start accepting it." He opens the script and begins to read.

Telephone, Telegraph, and Tell a Forensician

There are some serious scientific theories abroad that gossip is not only the major material of human communication, but that it also has evolutionary value. For some reason natural selection has favored the genetic material of the busybody, until busybodiness has become an essential ingredient of the human makeup. It is right there on the DNA; as soon as the Human Genome Project is completed, we'll be able to point to it, splice it into tomatoes and tuna fish, and generally wreak havoc with it. Assuming that those theories about gossip are correct, that is. All I know is that I have it on good authority, I can't tell you who, but last night I saw him out with...

Regardless of the survival value of gossip, or its percentage of the average human conversation, its reality is indisputable. So is its speed. The meeting of the Nighten Day Speech and Debate Team has barely ended before the word is out through the entire forensics community that the team is being disbanded. The word is spread face-to-face, over the telephone wires, through E-mail, in chat rooms, on listservers. The nice thing about gossip at the end of our millennium is that it can travel faster than the facts on which it is based. One suspects that the news had hit the Internet before Principal Walsh had even told Tarnish Jutmoll. Or at least, that's what Tarnish Jutmoll thinks.

Tarnish is sitting at the desktop computer in his apartment, reading the messages that have been posted to the Lincoln-Douglas listserv, of which he is a member. The original posting querying if the team's demise is a fact came from a newly relocated coach way down in Texas. Not from a Nighten Dayer but from Texas. Two thousand miles away as the crow flies, give or take a few homesteads and not accounting for the line to get into the Alamo. Posted at 3:12 p.m. How could he have heard that quickly?

The responses, the first of which verified the item as bona fide, have been universally sympathetic. There are not that many forensics programs in the country to begin with, much less forensics programs with long, honorable histories. When one of this select fraternity is guillotined, all the rest of the brotherhood tenderly start rubbing their necks.

If Tarnish was depressed before he logged on, he is now completely demoralized. It was bad enough sharing the news with the team, but now the news has been shared with the world at large. Everyone knows, and they're all tut-tutting and offering their banal condolences and Tarnish knows that they mean well but the end result is that he feels like the poster boy for American academic irresponsibility. It is no fun being famous for something you didn't want to happen.

Tarnish logs off from the Internet and turns off his computer. It is getting near dinner time, and he ought to be hungry, but he has no desire to eat, or even to think of eating. He stands up and looks around the room. There is the television, but he hasn't watched television at six o'clock in his life and he isn't going to start now. There's books, but he

hasn't got the concentration to sit and read and absorb the words on the page. Maybe he could try a magazine, something less demanding--

A copy of Metro New York is lying on the top of his coffee table. No, he suddenly decides. He doesn't want to read. He wants to talk. He needs company.

He looks over at the telephone. He should call first.

But she's probably not even home yet. He vaguely remembers her telling him that nowadays she gets in from the city at around six-thirty. If Tarnish leaves the house now, he can be there when she arrives.

"That's it," he says aloud to the empty room.

He shuffles over to the mirror, adjusts the tie that he had half-undone when he entered the apartment, and runs his fingers through his thick white hair. Satisfied that this is about as good as he gets, he puts on the sports jacket that he had tossed over the back of one of the dining room chairs, grabs the car keys from the shelf, and heads out the door for what he hopes will be some supportive tea and sympathy.

"Tarnish!"

"Hello, Amnea." He is standing at her front door, looking and feeling sheepish.

"Come in," she says. "I wasn't expecting you."

"I wasn't expecting me either," he says, brushing past her. He looks around. This is the first time he has been in Amnea's house. A short flight of stairs leads upwards directly in front of him, while to the left is what appears to be a family room, with a door to the cellar on the right.

"Come on upstairs," Amnea says to him, leading the way. "I was just about to put some dinner on. Have you eaten yet?"

"No," he tells her, following her up the stairs. She is dressed in what he assumes are her office clothes, a sedate maroon suit and dark stockings, but with running shoes instead of dress shoes. For some reason the juxtaposition of business and non-business strikes him as unexpectedly attractive.

But hasn't Amnea always been unexpectedly attractive to him?

"I was just going to throw together a salad and some cheese. Chesney is in the city with his father tonight, so I'm all alone here."

When she reaches the top of the stairs she stops and turns to face him. She is about to say something, but she catches herself. She begins again.

"Are you all right, Tarnish? You don't look well."

He sighs as he reaches her. "Today was the day," he says. "Principal Walsh told me that the team was dead, and I had to tell the kids."

"Oh." She puts her hand on his sleeve. "You poor man. Come. Sit. Tell me about it."

She leads him to the couch. He drops down and she sits next to him.

"There isn't much to say," he begins. "Walsh said we had enough funds to make it through the Algren tournament, and that would be the end of it. And that's what I told the kids."

"How did they take it?"

"Not badly. Not yet, anyhow. I think they're still at the disbelief stage. They thought we might be able to do some fundraising. Maybe have a car wash. They have no idea." He shakes his head.

"Poor Tarnish." Her hand is now resting on his hand. "I don't know what to say."

"There's nothing to say. It's over. Done with. I've just got to learn to deal with it."

"You're not alone, Tarnish. You know that."

He looks into her eyes. "I know that," he says.

She leans closer to him, her face only inches from his. "Chesney isn't here."

He swallows. He can read her mind. He didn't come here for this.

But he has no objections to it.

"I think we can do without him," Tarnish Jutmoll says.

And he takes Amnea Nutmilk into his arms. And she offers no resistance.

Welcome to the Bahamas.

Will Kumar and David succeed as Sullivan and Gilbert?

Is gossip good for the species?

**Are Amnea and Tarnish going to start holding hands in the park and getting all
kissy-face and snookie-ookums?**

Will Sarah Palin get another background check?

Did McCain really mean *Michael* Palin?

**The potatoes grow between your toes in our next episode: "Mumps: Childhood
disease or hunchbacked mimes?"**