



Episode 91

She Looks Askance With Arms Akimbo

Alida Devans has a private office deep in the bowels of Brooklyn Behemoth High School, past the steamy jungle of the boys' locker room, past the basement boiler room where the custodians seek their private sanctuary, laughing darkly over jokes half-heard in the womb of the ever-rumbling machinery, past the loading dock where unseen cargo arrives and departs in the night accompanied by the sounds of stray shouts and grinding truck gears. There are no other offices further away from the main line of activity in the school, but Ms. Devans prefers it like that. The reason is twofold. First, she wishes to run her domain away from the prying eyes of her colleagues; it is none of their business how she runs her speech team. And second, next to her office is an old abandoned lecture hall. In the years of building and rebuilding Behemoth, the lecture hall that started out slightly off from center has sunk to the bottom of the building like an ancient city covered over by the ensuing generations of civilization and dust and history. Now that lecture hall is entirely Alida's, and she uses it for her team's meetings and practice sessions. She couldn't ask for a better arrangement.

Alida has taught her first two classes this morning, both honors English, and now she has come to listen to a tape recording. She unlocks her office door and flips on the light. A cockroach scurries off across the floor and into hiding behind a file cabinet. Alida pays no attention to her visitor. This is, after all, Brooklyn. The likelihood of living without cockroaches is about as high as the likelihood of Parisians living without sidewalk-cafe philosophy. It just goes with the territory.

Alida sits at her desk. The room, given the fact that it is in a slightly dank sub-basement, is fairly comfortable. In addition to her desk and her high-backed executive chair, which easily fits her full six-foot-tall frame, there are two overstuffed chairs with throw blankets over the arms, and a wall of bookshelves stacked with the collected years of her plays and drama workbooks. She unlocks the bottom drawer of her desk and pulls out a small cassette player.

The tape is in her briefcase. It was given to her by one of her Duo students. It was made two weeks ago at the Toulouse-Lautrec CFL, and it has taken this long to get to Alida because the student who recorded it immediately caught the flu after the tournament and was out for a week. A whole week! These kids couldn't be any less sturdy nowadays. When Alida was a kid, you went to school, and that was the end of it. If you were sick, you took an aspirin and you still went to school. If you were so sick that you couldn't get out of bed, you'd better do a lot of vomiting to prove your disability, and don't expect to watch any TV although your father might bring home a comic book if you were really at death's door, and the next day you were going back to school whether you like it or not.

Take another aspirin.

Nowadays, no one seems to care anymore. Even at a magnet school like Behemoth, the kids disappear at the first sniffle. It drives Alida crazy when they don't come to tournaments. They get sick -- they say -- at the last minute. Sure. One lousy sneeze, a mosquito bite, their foot falls asleep, and they're nowhere to be seen. They call her cell phone at the last minute, or more likely their parents call because the kids are too scared because they know that Alida will not take the news kindly.

She sighs. Alida Devans is fifty-three years old, in many ways a woman from another time, frozen in the amber of her own upbringing, the beliefs she acquired when she was young and which she has never shaken.

She wouldn't have it any other way.

She places the cassette into her tape player. The recording was made surreptitiously from a small hand-held machine. Only one entry was recorded, because only one entry was suspect: Hannah Brown and Ted Hughes, the lead Duo team from Hebrides.

Alida's eyes narrow as she presses the play button. Hebrides High School. Catholic to the core, Hebrides is a suburban school populated by nuns and priests and the Irish and the French and all those others. It is also home to Sister Levi al-Chaim....

Alida, of course, was herself raised a Catholic, which explains a lot. It is hard to foster a mindless, prejudicial hatred unless you yourself are somehow tainted by the thing you hate. She has nothing against Hannah and Ted, mind you. They are, in their way, a talented team. In fact, they may be the most talented Duo team on the northeastern circuit, now that William Hand and David Brillig are no longer performing together. Alida knows all about William and David going their separate ways: it is the talk of the Speechie universe. No one seems to know why, but that is no matter. As long as they are apart, there is room for the rest of the world. Alida's own team might have a chance to star this year.

Except for Hannah Brown and Ted Hughes. Who are, frankly, every bit as good as Alida's Behemoths. Which should make for an interesting year of solid academic competition.

But Alida Devans is not interested in an interesting year of solid academic competition. She would never admit it, but her number one goal in the world is to win. She coaches a team, and the team competes, and they are not in there to lose, goddamnit.

Alida has won virtually every award available in the forensics community. She has done it fair and square, with nothing up here sleeve except the cream of the crop of the smartest kids in the biggest city in the country. Of course, she has to share that cream with, among others, Manhattan Lodestone. There is more than one magnet forensics school in New York, but the city that never sleeps is capable of generating more than one Debate God, the same way it is capable of generating more than one decent restaurant. There is room enough for an Alida Devans and a Mr. Lo Pat. The melded power of their teams creates a Manhattan forensics combine. Ms. Devans can not conceive of challenging anything done by Mr. Lo Pat. She would never tape one of his teams, looking for violations of the rules. Not that one of his teams might not violate the rules, but there would be no joy in the discovery. Far from it. The only possible results would be a threat to the supremacy of the combine, and the creation of Mr. Lo Pat as an enemy.

No one, not even a Debate God, wants a Debate God for an enemy.

But there are no Debate Gods at Hebrides. There is only Sister Levi, and no matter how old she is, no matter how Catholic, no matter how guaranteed to get into heaven, she is no Debate God. She is too local, too parochial, too ... Catholic.

No, Alida Devans will have no fear of the repercussions, if she uncovers what she thinks she is going to uncover. Aside from causing the loss of her immortal soul, she is certain there is nothing Sister Levi can do to her.

As the tape plays, she follows along on her copy of the script. The local CFL Duo rules are straightforward. Each of the two participants can portray one character only. They can abridge their material however they see fit, but never using the words of a third character. Only the two characters they have chosen are allowed in any way, shape or form.

It would be nice to have a copy of Hannah and Hughes' cutting of the piece, which is an obscure play written in the 50s revolving around adultery and alcoholism and avarice and all the other A words.

"You left me for her," Hannah is saying.

"I didn't want to," Ted replies.

"You left me for her and you expect me to take you back, with open arms and open lips." Her reading is fierce and hard. "What a putz!"

"If you hadn't been looking at Fred Mer--"

Alida Devans switches off the tape, rewinds a few inches, then plays it back again.

"...you expect me to take you back, with open arms and open lips. What a putz!"

Stop.

Rewind.

"What a putz!"

Alida thumbs through the scene in her copy of the script. The wife never says those words. At least not here. Alida starts flipping the pages, back and forth, back and forth. The husband doesn't say them either.

It's got to be in here somewhere.

"You want to go back to your husband?" the boyfriend asks. The boyfriend is the owner of a delicatessen in the Bronx. The wife is described as a famous sculptress. Talk about corny and dated.

"He is my husband, Bernie."

"He left you for that, that, what was she?"

"A yoga instructor."

"Right. A yoga instructor."

"Hatha yoga."

"Hatha yoga is better than none. I know he's your husband, Monica, but what a putz!"

What a putz!

There it is, in black and white. Spoken not by the wife or the husband, but by the deli owner boyfriend who eventually runs off with the daughter's violin instructor.

What a putz!

Alida Devans carefully underlines the passage in her copy of the text. She's got them now. She feels a little bad for Hannah Brown and Ted Hughes, but only a little. And she's feeling very pleased about Sister Levi al-Chaim.

"We'll nail those Catholics now," she says, popping the cassette out of the player.

The Designated Driver

The lawyer, Starbuck, sits on a canvas chair next to the swimming pool. The room is warm and damp, thick with the smell of chlorine. Starbuck is wearing a suit and tie, completely unruffled by the humid heat, and is going over some papers in a folder he has taken from his briefcase. Starbuck is a large, tall man, almost completely bald, wearing oversized aviator-frame eyeglasses. His size and fitness and bronze skin exude health and vitality, while his small eyes behind the glasses add a definition of intelligence to his profile.

Don Proscenio ("the Whale") Vitelli is floating around in the pool, leaning back against a large, bright green raft, his arms entwined around it so that he looks like an inverted, undercooked pretzel. A pair of Vitelli's undistinguished myrmidons sit quietly playing cards at a table on the opposite side of the room from the lawyer.

Starbuck looks up from his papers. "You had your doctor's appointment this morning," he calls out.

Don Proscenio does not respond.

"I asked you a question," Starbuck repeats impatiently.

"No, you made a statement of fact."

"All right. A statement of fact. Would you mind confirming it?"

Another pause. "Yes, I had my doctor's appointment this morning."

The Whale suddenly dives under the water. A broken, refracted image of his immense body can be seen from above, away from Starbuck.

"Then I take it the report was not good," Starbuck continues after his boss's head breaks the surface.

"He wants to put me on a diet, for one thing. He always wants to put me on a diet."

"Because you need to lose weight, Proscenio."

"My weight is perfect for this pool. This pool was designed around my weight. If I changed my weight, I'd have to change the pool too. I can't afford it."

"Proscenio, you could afford Cleveland, if you wanted it."

"I'm not going on a diet, Tom. Never have, never will."

"It's not good for your health, all that weight, Proscenio."

"That's what my doctor said. That's what my doctor always says. He also told me I should get some exercise."

"And so you should."

"I swim all day."

"You float all day, Proscenio. That's not the same thing."

"Close enough."

Starbuck puts his papers back into his briefcase. "I know I can't get you to diet, Proscenio, but at least I can get you to take some exercise. Why don't you come with me this afternoon to play golf? It's a beautiful autumn day. You could take a little walk, hit the little ball around, have a few laughs."

"Golf is the stupidest game in the world." Don Proscenio paddles backwards a minute.

"You've never played. You might like it."

"I don't have to play it to know I won't like it."

"You should give it a try, Proscenio."

"It's genetic. Believe me. Italians simply can't play golf. Our DNA won't allow it."

"Proscenio, I know you. I've known you for years. I think you might like golf. You should give it a try."

"Stupid game."

"I wouldn't even make you walk. We could take a cart. Caddies. The whole deal. No stress, at least not the first time out."

"Don't you have work to do, Tom?"

"Keeping you healthy is my main job today. I'm your chief adviser, Proscenio. Why don't you take my advice?"

The fat man rises up from the pool. One of his myrmidons is there with a fresh towel, in which Don Proscenio wraps himself.

"I'll compromise with you," the don says to his consigliere. "You want me to take some exercise, I'll take some exercise. We'll go to lunch at Angelo's."

"Eating is not exactly exercise, Proscenio."

"I know, but listen. They just opened a golf course next to Angelo's. We could play there."

"There's no golf course next to Angelo's. The restaurant is right out next to Route One. There's nowhere to put a golf course there."

"Some consigliere." The don shakes his head. "Thinks he knows everything. There's definitely a golf course there, Tom. It opened a couple of weeks ago." The don slips into a shiny velvet bathrobe. It is a royal purple. "It's a miniature golf course."

Starbuck laughs. "Miniature golf? That's less exercise than eating."

"You don't want to go?"

"Oh, I'll go." He looks at his watch. "Before lunch?"

"Before lunch."

"You're on."

Putting People First

The name of the course is Ari's Range and Miniature Challenge.

The day is unseasonably warm. A sports jacket is all that is necessary to keep off the slight chill that comes in on the occasional passing zephyr. Don Proscenio and Tom Starbuck stand on the first tee, putters in hand. The two myrmidons from the pool are now sitting at a picnic table next to the open window of the office. The four men are the only customers of either the miniature golf course or the driving range that is attached to it, which is not surprising at eleven o'clock on a Tuesday morning in the middle of October. A sign over the office window announces that the Ari operation will be shutting down on November 1.

"You can tee off first," Starbuck says gracefully.

"Thanks a lot."

Each of the holes has a name. The first one is called Plato's Cave. The player hits the ball into a cave lit by an imitation fire; you can only see the shadow of your ball on the wall as it either goes in or misses the hole.

Don Proscenio swings his club. His ball goes off the rails and onto the sidewalk. Starbuck strides over and retrieves it, and places it back on the tee.

"Try again," he says.

Don Proscenio tries again. This time he makes a hole in one, absent any penalties that might be applied for his first shot.

"Diabolical," he mutters.

Apparently all that is required to make a hole in one is to get your ball into the cave in the first place. Starbuck does exactly that.

The second hole is named Wee Kirkegaard. The player is required to launch the ball up a steep incline fast enough to propel it over a yard-wide gulf. If the ball fails to make the leap, it will fall into a sandy trench.

"We could have played regular golf if I thought it was going to be this hard," Don Proscenio says.

"Putt for dough," Starbuck mutters in reply.

They tee off. After a few lapses at the leap of faith, they finally sink their balls. The third hole is called the Categorical Imperative. Instructions on the score card warn the player to hit his ball as if he were establishing a rule for the way all balls should be hit.

"I think the designer of this course was deranged," Don Proscenio comments as he places his red-striped ball onto the little declivity on the rubber tee matt.

At least the third hole is straightforward. The fourth hole, Eternal Recurrence, requires the player to hit a shot from the tee to a second identical tee. From that tee, the shot must go to yet another tee. There is no cup at the end.

The fifth hole is called Utility. The ball is placed on the tee, which is at the top of what is for all purposes a funnel to the cup. The slightest tap off the tee is guaranteed to sink the ball.

"I've always thought that golf was a game that engages the mind," Starbuck says at one point, "but I've never seen it quite this unabashedly philosophical."

"I thought this was going to be fun," Don Proscenio says glumly. "Five hours of calisthenics would be more fun than this."

"No wonder they don't do much business here," Starbuck replies.

The next hole is called the Dialectic. You hit your ball into a second ball, and if you hit it just right a third ball pops up and continues the journey into the cup. The flag has the word synthesis printed on it.

They putt, they mutter, they putt some more. One hole, instead of having a mat of astroturf, is completely grown over with weeds. It is named the State of Nature; all players are requested to tee off simultaneously, the strongest pushing the others out of the way on the fairway.

"This is one nasty hole," Starbuck says, knocking his putter into Don Proscenio's as they swing at the same time.

"Brutish," the don agrees.

At least it is short.

They continue their game for a few more holes, until they reach The Deconstruction. The cup is above ground, nailed upside down next to the tee. The fairway is completely separate from this tee-hole combination, and none of the component parts of the hole seem to serve any purpose.

"What's par for this hole?" Don Proscenio asks.

Starbuck reads the score card. "Zero."

Don Proscenio tosses his putter into the air. It lands athwart the hole known as The Ontological Express. "Want to eat, Tom?"

Starbuck also tosses his putter away. "I never thought you'd ask."

The two men walk back toward the entrance to the course.

"And you say regular golf is more fun than this? Don Proscenio asks.

"Definitely."

Don Proscenio shakes his head. "Trust me on this, Tom. Eating is better exercise than golf."

"I don't know. Maybe it's just that eating is better exercise than philosophy."

"Whatever."

The myrmidons have the Lincoln Town Car waiting. The Don and his consigliere get into the back seat.

Overhead, the neon sign hisses as it glows dark blue against the gold of the changing leaves around it. Ari's Range and Miniature Challenge.

Fore!

Will Alida Devans wreak havoc on the Hebrides team of Hannah and Hughes?

Will Don Proscenio ("the Whale") Vitelli ever lose weight?

Did Tiger play miniature golf when he was a cub?

How come there's no hole for John Locke, where you give up some of your strokes in order to justify Capital Punishment for those 23 innocent people you hear so much about?

Is every bank in America really going out of business?

Forget what you've already learned in our next episode: "Maimonides or yours?"